



Story Circle Journal

Volume 1 Number 4

A newsletter for women who have stories to

Widening Circles— The Network Grows

In my compost pile on the hill the leaves are of all different kinds. There are grass clippings too, weeds, small twigs, and kitchen leavings. As I turn the pile over everything joins with everything else. It is hard to know any longer what is what because it is mixed together, on the way to becoming one thing, soil. I take comfort in this. Through the seasons my memories are composted, too, and like the leaves they come together. Turned over and over, in time they finally turn into something new—rich, dark earth in the palm of my hand. — Gunilla Norris



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The twelfth month of the year is always a good time for taking stock of what we've done over the past eleven. Looking back over 1997, all we can say is "Whew—it's been busy!" At the Story Circle, the whole year has been full of exciting events.

It began in January, when Susan Wittig Albert's book *Writing From Life*, was published. Designed specifically to help women write and share their life stories and to meet the growing interest in women's memoirs, the book attracted a great deal of attention. As Susan gave workshops around the state of Texas, she met many women who were anxious to tell their stories. The workshops were inspiring, and they gave her an idea. What was needed was an on-going organization that would provide encouragement, inspiration, and support for the often-difficult job of telling our stories.

In March, Susan and Carol Abbassi filed incorporation papers in Texas, and the Story Circle Network was born. Over the next two months, Susan and Carol met with dozens of women to explore possibilities for the new organization. Twelve outstanding women agreed to serve on the first board of directors, and the Story Circle Network had begun its journey.

By June, the Story Circle was more than just a collection of great

ideas, it was a reality. *The Story Circle Journal*, which began publication in February, continued to grow in subscriptions and contributions from readers. Under the guidance of Dr. Eleanor Jordan, the board moved promptly to apply for federal tax-exempt status, and by September, the application was approved. Also in September, the first "official" memoir workshop was held, in Austin TX, with Susan and Carol sharing the leadership. It was a great success.

October saw more activity. A team of website developers, students from the University of Texas, got underway with the help of Nancy Blue and Judy Rohde. If you've ever created a website, you know how much work it is! When the job is done (perhaps by the time you read this newsletter), you'll be able to drop in for a visit at:

www.storycircle.org. We hope that the website will connect all of us, providing a meeting place where we can give ourselves voice, share our stories, and learn from others' experiences.

But the Network is more than a collection of activities and board meetings. It is made up of Story Circles all around the country—groups of women who come together to write, read, and share. Over the past year, nearly two dozen Circles got underway in seven different states, involving several hundred women. (There may have been more—these are just the Circles we have

—continued on page 2

Network Planning—*from Page 1*

learned about.) The concept of the Story Circle was publicized in several important publications, such as *New Age Journal*, and requests for information continue to come in from around the country.

What's ahead? The board is planning courses in memoir writing, journaling, and the personal essay, to be taught in Austin in Spring, 1998. There will be a readers' group, weekend workshops, and a weekend conference featuring a well-known memoirist. We'll be doing a special mailing in January, so you can plan to attend, if you're in our area. We're also working on a new logo, a Speaker's Bureau, and improvements to the *Journal*. And we hope very much that you're planning to create a Story Circle in your community, to widen the Circle even

The Story Circle Network

The Story Circle Network—What is it and who are the members?

The Story Circle Network is made up of women who want to explore their lives by exploring their stories.

What can you gain from the Network?

You will receive the following publications, information, and opportunities. These things won't be available all at once—we're just getting started! But as our membership grows, our activities will expand. You'll get:

- ◇ **four issues** of the 16- to 22-page newsletter, *Story Circle Journal*, with ideas for writing additional chapters of your life story, plus poetry and brief personal essays from subscribers
- ◇ **the opportunity to submit your writing** to the newsletter and other Network publications
- ◇ **a network guide** that will allow you to directly contact members with interests and experiences similar to yours (forthcoming, as the Network grows and members send us their information)
- ◇ **a list of Story Circles** across the country (forthcoming, as new Circles form)
- ◇ **book reviews and a resource guide** listing groups, teachers, and publications that are committed to helping women tell their stories (in each newsletter)
- ◇ **a calendar** of happenings and events related to women's storytelling (in each newsletter, as members submit information)

What can you contribute to the Network?

The Story Circle Network is built out of our shared experiences. To it, we hope you will bring your-self and your willingness to share your life and what you have learned from it. If you wish, you may contribute some of your writing (poetry, prose, book reviews—ask for a copy of our writer's guidelines). If you would like to be in contact with other subscribers, you may place your name in our Pen Pals and Writing Partners column. If you offer products or services that would be appropriate to the Network membership, you may wish to list them in the Resource Directory. If you are a teacher or group leader, you are invited to calendar your related events.

We also hope that many of you will decide to participate by leading a Story Circle in your community. It isn't hard, and it's enormously rewarding. Won't you give it a try?

How do you become a member?

That's the easiest part! You automatically become a member of the Network when you subscribe to *Story Circle Journal*. Annual memberships are \$20 in the United States, \$26 in Canada and Mexico, and \$30 elsewhere. You will find a membership form at the back of this newsletter. Please join us and share your story.

Visit our new website!
www.storycircle.org



Story Circle

STORY CIRCLE is a quarterly newsletter, published in February, May, August, and November. It is written by and for women who want to share their experiences. Its purpose is to encourage readers to become writers, guide women to set down their true stories, and encourage the sharing of women's lives. This newsletter is provided for information and is not intended to replace qualified therapeutic assistance.

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Back Issues: Back issues are available either as first-run or photocopies, for \$5.50 each (includes first class postage). Canada, Mexico, and elsewhere: \$8 each.

Missed Issues: We try to ensure that *Story Circle Journal* arrives in your mailbox four times a year. If you miss an issue, send us a note and we'll mail you a replacement.

Change of address: If you move, please tell us. Unless you send us your new address, we can't guarantee that you'll receive your newsletter!



Scrapbooks & Memories

Who remembers scrapbooks? We have all kept them, at one time or another—those delightfully untidy albums stuffed with snapshots, notes, newspaper clippings, pressed flowers, and odd bits of fabric and lace. Mostly forgotten, they linger on shelves, in the bottoms of trunks, and under the bed.

A Personal Archive

But the scrapbook needn't be a thing of the past. It can serve as a useful personal *archive*, a collection of valuable remembrances, memorabilia, and dreams, preserved for you and your family. "There are so many things I'd never remember if it weren't for my scrapbooks," says Robin Bruton, of Anchorage AK, an inveterate scrapbooker. "Someday, I hope to be able to use all that material as the basis for a memoir."

Whether you call it a scrapbook, album, or personal archive, a collection of photos and memorabilia can be a valuable treasurehouse of memories—a way of ensuring that the small but important details of a busy and creative life won't be forgotten.

Archive Ideas

A visit to a craft or paper-supply store will show you how much scrapbooks have changed since you were in high school. You can choose from a broad range of scrapbooks: expandable books to which you can add large pages; three-ring binders that allow you to use different papers and let your pages fall flat; and spiral bound books with imaginative designs. Prices range from \$10 to \$150, depending on the cover.

Album pages used to be black—but that, too, has changed with the times. Scrapbook pages come in all colors. Or you can use artists' pads of heavyweight paper (100 percent

cotton), and make your own tissue-paper interleaves. Or you might go the whole way and make your own paper! With scrapbooks these days, the only limit is your imagination.

And you can forget about those little black stick-on corners with the foul-tasting glue. These days, you can attach photos and other items with archival photo corners or stickers that are available in many shapes, sizes, and colors. Or you can use a special archival glue, available at craft stores, that won't warp your stick-ons or cause the paper to deteriorate. You might also consider decorative stitching as a means of attaching objects to a page, or hand-made paper or fabric pockets, or even specially-constructed clear plastic pages.

Good for a Lifetime

When you opened your grandmother's precious scrapbook, you may have been dismayed at the condition of the photos and the paper memorabilia. Most paper is acidic, and will eventually disintegrate. One suggestion: ask your paper supply shop about using special "buffered" paper for your pages. Although expensive, this paper helps to neutralize whatever is stuck to it. Another idea: photocopy older items onto acid-free paper, which will last longer.

Your Ideas?

Do you construct scrapbooks for special occasions? Do you have some nifty scrapbook schemes you'd like to share? If you're a scrapbook creator and would like to tell us about your archives, we'd love to pass on your ideas to other Story Circle members. Jot down your thoughts and send them to Scrapbook Corner, Story Circle Network, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605.

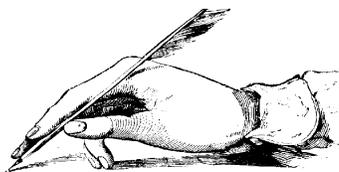
SCRAPBOOK PROJECTS

How about creating a scrapbook in which each page holds a drawing or photograph of each of your favorite outfits—along with a description of where you got it (Neiman Marcus? the Village Thrift Shop? Aunt Mamie?), where you wore it, what interesting things happened to you when you wore it, and... Well, you get the idea. Another version of a closetful of memories.

Or maybe you'd like to immortalize your garden. You could make a scrapbook that includes a diagram of your garden, photos taken at different seasons of the year, photos or drawings of individual plants, and even pressed and dried leaves and flowers inserted into Mylar or clear plastic sleeves and attached to the page. Since many of our favorite plants are "pass-along plants," gifts from one friend to another, you might want to include a history of each plant—who gave it to you or where you got it. Do special plants hold special memories for you? This is a good place to record them.

Using computer-generated fonts, you can create any special-effect captions and blocks of text that you want to add to your scrapbook pages. Or if you're a calligrapher, here's your chance to show off.

Get creative! Many stores offer delightful scrapbook pages, colorful papers, delicious pens—an invitation to creativity and play in your scrapbook. Can't find what you want in your local shops? **Keeping Memories Alive** (800-419-4949) offers a terrific color catalog that will get your creative juices flowing. For other ideas, visit their website: <http://www.scrapbooks.com>. Scrapbooks are fun!



Journaling: A Valuable Tool for Memoir Writing

Beginning with this issue, we'll be offering a regular column on journal writing that reflects the many ways journaling can enrich our lives. If you would like to contribute, send your ideas, tips, and suggestions to Journaling, Story Circle Network, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605. If you would like to write a guest column, send us a couple of paragraphs describing what you'd like to do.—Susan

Journaling and memoir writing are sister arts, both providing a way into the secret places of memory. Both help to guide us out of the past and into the present. Both heal. If you're writing a memoir, you should be keeping a journal, too. If you're keeping a journal—and especially if you have journals from past times in your life—you already have the raw material for a memoir.

A Record of Discovery

Journaling is the practice of writing down, every day or every few days, what has been happening in your life and what you feel about it. (The word *diary* is often used to describe writing down what has happened, but without additional commentary.) It is a very important practice, one that can add richness, depth, and dimension to your life.

We keep journals for many reasons. Most of us write things down because we're afraid we'll forget—forget the joy and relief of finishing that important project, forget the pure delight we felt watching the sun set over the mountain, forget the sadness of saying goodbye to someone we loved. When we journal, we not only capture the moment so that we can experience it again and again but enrich that moment with the feelings it awakened in us, so that we can *feel* that moment again and again.

Journaling not only allows us to record, however; it allows us to discover. As I keep a record of my daily life—writing down the little disappointments, the small triumphs, the tiny, fragile moments—I learn more about the way I live and the choices I make. Why do I do this, rather than that? Why do I choose that, instead of something else? In my journal, I can reflect on my choices, and my reflection can lead me to discover truths about myself that I might not have otherwise guessed. If journaling is a regular practice in our lives, it can become a valuable resource—a place to learn and discover, a place to grow.

Journal Practice

Perhaps the hardest part of keeping a journal is making it a regular part of our lives. While we might agree that journaling is terribly important, it's easy to put it off, or find something else that seems temporarily more important. Here are some ideas for making your journal central to your life:

- ❖ Set a regular time to journal. Many women find that early morning is best. Writing before going to bed works better for others. Write for at least 15 minutes—a shorter period may not allow you to get it all down. But give yourself permission to write

for a longer time, if you have more to say.

- ❖ Use a journaling method that allows you to capture thoughts *fast*. This means a free-flowing pen and a notebook or binder that is easy to handle. Women who work on a word processor often find that computer journaling encourages them to write swiftly. Why write fast? The faster you write, the easier it is to disable the editor—that part of you that *doesn't* want you to write that thought, or insists on proper spelling and grammar.

- ❖ Grammar? Forget it. Aim for honesty and completeness in your journal writing, not elegance. Bad language? In journaling, *all* words are good words, if they come from the deepest, most private places of the heart.

- ❖ Since you're recording your private thoughts, you may want to give some thought to safeguarding your privacy. While we hope that the people with whom we live will respect the privacy of our writings, we can't always count on it. If privacy is an issue for you, find a way to keep your journal safe.

Journaling is one of the most rewarding kinds of life writing. Make it a regular part of your writing practice, and experience the joy that will enrich your life!

Looking Ahead

Each issue of the *SCJ* is loosely organized around a particular theme. We urge you to submit your brief essays, poetry, and book reviews on these themes, as well as your favorite women's quotations. But we also invite your non-theme writing, so please share! Send for our Writers' Guidelines.

February, 1998—Out of the Fire: From Devastation to New Growth (deadline 1/1/98)

May, 1998—Minding My Own Business: Writing about Work (deadline 4/1/98)

August, 1998—Life With Father (deadline 7/1/98)

Gardens of Imagination and Memory

by Susan Wittig Albert

Each issue, in these pages, Susan writes about life-writing. Her articles are designed to help you add chapters to your life story. They will usually take the form of the chapters of **Writing From Life**, offering ideas and topics for your writing, examples and clippings from the writing of other women, organizational suggestions, and ways to celebrate your creation. If you do all the exercises suggested here, you will have enough material to create one full chapter of your book—the story of your life, to which (we hope) you are continuing to add new chapters. So look into the gardens of your imagination, pull out those memories, and open a new chapter in the story of your life.

My Mother's Garden

 My mother gardened as if her soul depended on it—and perhaps it did. We lived in Illinois, where the soil is deep and the growing season long, and Mother took advantage of every inch and every moment. At one house, there was room for only a row of lettuce and beans in the tiny back yard, with a few pixie-bright marigolds and gladiolas (my mother's favorite flower) standing as tall as soldiers, guarding the neat little plot.

At another house, there was a daunting acre of garden—rows and rows of potatoes to be dug after the first frost, beans to be picked and shelled, corn to be stripped and husked, carrots for pulling, tomatoes for canning. I remember spading into the ground and turning up a hidden cache of red potatoes, spilling like buried treasure. I remember filling our red wagon with those cold, earthy potatoes, and hauling them to the musty-smelling root cellar to wait in the dark until Mother turned them into our dinner. It was a job I hated then—weren't there better things for a girl to be doing than digging potatoes in sub-freezing temperatures? But that year, my father's company went on strike, and Mother showed us that we could live out of that garden. Her work on that patch of ground taught me more lessons about the reward of effort than I can count. And every spring, when I am considering what I will add to my own garden, I think of hers, and what she would have planted, and am lost for a moment in memories.

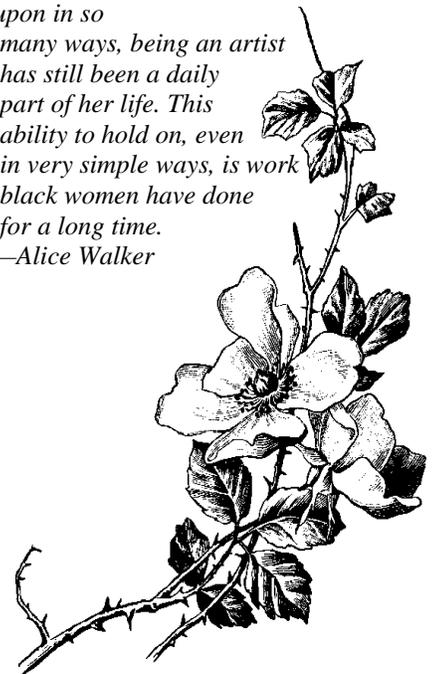
In her essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Alice Walker reminds us that gardening has been, for many women, the only way of expressing their creativity, of exploring art, even though life may have seemed to deny them the chance to be artists. Here's what she says:

My mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees—until night came and it was too dark to see.

Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her

In search of my mother's garden, I found my own.—Alice Walker

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant...She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty. Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them. For her, hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a long time.
—Alice Walker



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We write to taste life twice, in the moment, and in retrospection... We write to be able to transcend our life, to reach beyond it. We write to teach ourselves to speak with others, to record the journey into the labyrinth.—Anaïs Nin

Writers live twice. They go along with their regular life, are as fast as anyone in the grocery store, crossing the street, getting dressed for work in the morning. But there's another part of them that... lives everything a second time. That sits down and sees their life again and goes over it. Looks at the texture and details.—Natalie Goldberg

Grubbing in the ground. It feels wonderful. I've become a kid with permission to be dirty. I am getting more than exercise here. Earth-connected, soil-sprinkled, humus-spread, I am turning everything over...I poke holes to drop the seeds in. Covered by new soil, each in their own place, the seeds wait for sun, for rain, and for their life force to produce the first delicate showing of green. I love this mystery. Each day I will come here to witness it.

It's grubbing-in-the-ground time. Thoroughly dirty from it all, I sprinkle a little earth on myself for good measure. Why not? I am planted in this garden too.—

creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena...

Are there gardens in your memory, as well? Sit quietly for a moment and think—about your mother's garden, or the garden that belonged to your grandmother or your aunt or a family friend. What were they like? What flowers or vegetables can you remember? What colors, tastes, smells, what garden pleasures? Did you have garden chores you loved or hated? How did you feel when you were in the garden? What did it teach you? What did it tell you or show you about the person who planted it?

There are many stories planted and waiting to bloom in old gardens—gardens of the memory. How many can you tell?



Gardening Twice

“Writers live twice,” say Anaïs Nin and Natalie Goldberg. Writers live in the real world, and in the world of imagination and memory. Let’s move into that world for a moment, and read a few “twice-told” gardening memories—some beautiful, amusing, daunting, some interwoven with other memories, but each retold with simple pleasure. The first is from Gladys Tabor’s book, *Stillmeadow Sampler*, which has touches of the romance of living with a garden:

Now Jill comes in, smudged with garden dirt. She has been planting more beans. From now on until the black frost, the garden will be a constant excitement. The pink crisp rhubarb, the asparagus, the first snow peas, the lettuce and scallions usher in the season. How delicious is a sandwich of freshly baked bread and young scallions well salted and peppered!

We can now carry our trays to the Quiet Garden where the Lincoln lilacs overhang the picket fence and the flowering crab gives a rosy glow. The lilies of the valley are spreading out of bounds, we note, and the lemon thyme planted between the flagstones half covers them. When we step on it, a sweet odor fills the air.

This next garden spot, described by Sara Stein in her book, *My Weeds*, reminds us that before there are gardens, there are weeds, and that the work of clearing a garden space requires energy and commitment and muscle. But clearing often opens up a view we hadn’t suspected:

We did clear the area, all of it. We were tripped, trapped, poked, bruised, bloodied. And we got poison ivy, week after week. I admit that there is pleasure in clearing ground, in seeing a tangle opened to eye and stride, and in having given weeds

the licking they deserve. As shrouds of vine were cut away, we saw that to the rear the ground rose like the rim of a bowl to a stand of white pines we hadn't known were there, and that the contour led gently, naturally, as though it had intended a path to run beside it, around a bend, beneath the branches of an old apple tree, and on into the woods.

And here is one other memory, this one quieter and more inward-turning—not sweetly romantic, not muscular, but attentive. It comes from a book of essays by Gunilla Norris called *Journeying in Place: Reflections from a Country Garden*:

The farmhouse I live in sits on a little more than two acres. Once the farm itself was big. It has pastures, woodlots, hay fields, orchards, and gardens....But I have come to know that in these two acres there is intense and quiet activity that is *happening* twenty-four hours a day. I miss most of it. I get caught up in what must be done and therefore fail to experience the sunsets, the budding of the raspberries, the rusting of old farm implements in the earth, the building of wasp nests, and the death of old trees. But I feel the vibration of it all and I want to know this eventfulness better. Even just a little bit better!

Can you see how each of these fragments of garden memory shows us a different way to write our own memories? Perhaps we want to savor the garden scents and colors and freshness, as does Gladys Tabor. Or perhaps we want to tell a tale of struggle, of rolling up our sleeves and clearing land: a story of a garden won from wilderness, like Sara Stein's. Or perhaps, with Gunilla Norris, we simply want to reflect on the experience of living with nature in the natural world—we want simply to know the “eventfulness” of the garden a little bit better.

For your own twice-told tale, choose a garden you recall vividly—one of your own or someone else's. It might have been a large garden, or simply a collection of pots on the windowsill, in the country or on a city rooftop. Describe it, recalling as many sensory details as you can: the names of the plants, their sizes and shapes, their colors; the scents and sounds of the garden; the feel of the air, the season of the year. Include yourself in your description, too—why are you there? what are you doing? how are you feeling? what do you want? Give yourself fifteen minutes or a half-hour to linger over this writing. (When you are done, turn to page 11, and see how another writer has handled this writing task.)

And now that you've thought of one garden, it's time to think of several—to create an inventory of all the gardens you have ever been a part of. Take a clean sheet of paper, and mark it off by five- or ten-year periods. (This makes it easier to inventory our memories.) In each of the spaces, write down the gardens you recall from that period—your own, or someone else's. For example, here is an inventory compiled by Jerri, a Story Circle member:

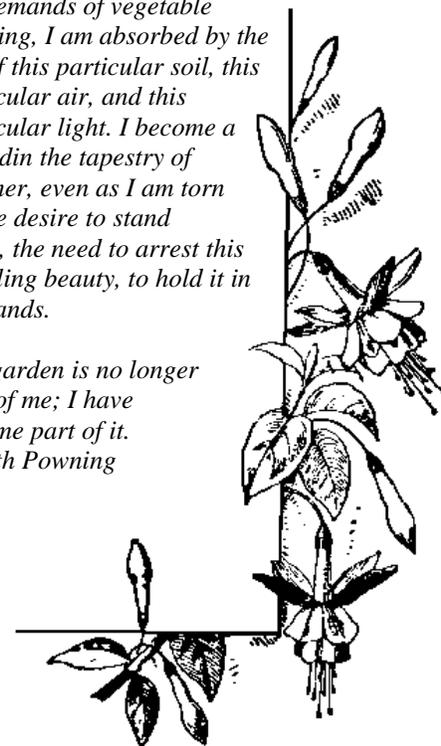
1950-1960: Mother's flowers, Gram's veggie garden (tomatoes!)
1960-1970: the radishes I grew for my freshman science project

As I pick cucumbers, their prickly skins caress my hand. My eggplants hang in purple splendor, glossy and silky of skin. I gather this harvest to me. I will consume it and make it part of my flesh even as I harvest experience and it, too, becomes part of my very being. I know I live by consuming life. And life is living in me, consuming me.

I am in the kitchen; through the window, the long grasses run before the wind, and on the table are mounds of green beans. Water is boiling on the stove; steam makes the lids dance and rattle. My knife flashes, chops, and my hands follow each other fluidly through familiar choreography. In the garden, the onion tops of collapsed in a soft tangle. It seems only yesterday that I planted the tiny sets. There is a peculiar satisfaction in the swiftness with which I pluck the onions from the soil and lay them in golden ranks to cure. Twist and pull the corn ears, tuck them under my arm. Shuck them in the garden and throw the husks to the horses....

It happens too fast. Yet in this speed, this urgency that inhibits reflection, in the busy-ness of living, in the demands of vegetable growing, I am absorbed by the life of this particular soil, this particular air, and this particular light. I become a thread in the tapestry of summer, even as I am torn by the desire to stand aside, the need to arrest this tumbling beauty, to hold it in my hands.

The garden is no longer part of me; I have become part of it.
—Beth Powning



My backyard on the slopes of Mount Tamalpais in Northern California is actually a very small meadow. In the summer and fall of year year a stag visits at dawn and at twilight. This year he has six points on his antlers. Last year five or perhaps four. He is heart-stopping.

Actually, I did not plan to have a stag, I planned to have a rose garden. The year after I moved here, I planted fifteen rosebushes, gifts from my friends. It was a lot of hard work, but I could see it in my mind's eye. Just like in Sunset magazine. The roses bloomed in the late spring and for a month the garden was glorious. Then the roses started disappearing. Puzzled, I eventually realized that something larger than aphids was eating them and became determined to catch it in the act. Getting up one morning and glancing out the window, I was transfixed by seeing the stag for the first time. As I watched in awe he unhurriedly crossed the yard, browsed for a while among the roses, and then delicately ate one of my Queen Elizabeths.

Every year since then I have had to make a difficult choice. Am I going to put up higher fences and have roses, or am I going to have a stag ten feet from my back door? Every year so far, I have chosen the stag...

I had thought I was planting rosebushes in order to have roses. It now seems I was actually planting rosebushes in order to have half an hour of silence with this magical animal every morning and every evening.—Rachel Naomi Remen

1970-1980: my 5x5' garden on Sheridan St—weeds! The window box at the Maple Rd apartment. African violets on the windowsill

1980-1990: the community vegetable garden space I rented (won 1st prize for a pumpkin), composting, all organic

1990-present: my organic garden, 50x50, vegetables & flowers

“I can trace out my personal history in my gardens,” Jerri told us. “From Mom’s and Gram’s gardens to mine—it’s all right there, now that I think of it. For instance, when I was just getting started at the bank and lived in an apartment, I only had time for a few plants on the kitchen windowsill—my life was full of other things. But now, my love for gardens has evolved into something much bigger.”

When you have made your own inventory, you could write about each of the gardens of your life. You might tell how it looked, where it was, what you loved about it. You might also include what was easy or hard to do, what you learned from that particular garden, and how it changed you.

“How it changed me?” you might ask doubtfully. Well, yes. I have planted what I thought were carrots and discovered radishes in their place. I have put out a plant in the fall, and forgotten about it until late spring, when it surprised me by bursting into bloom. I have intended to grow peonies, like those in my mother’s garden, only to learn that peonies don’t like Texas summers—and I have learned, to my great pleasure, that the rosemary thrives on the Texas heat! From all these gardening surprises, I have learned to be more flexible, more adaptable, less demanding, less perfectionistic. But my favorite story of a garden surprise comes from the poet Maxine Kumin, who writes this wonderful squash story in her book, *Women, Animals, and Vegetables*:

A few years ago, early in May, while upending a wheelbarrow load of horse manure onto the pile, I noticed some splayed green leaves emerging along the midriff of this sizable mountain....By mid-June, the south slope was covered with a dense network of what were now, clearly, squash leaves. Male blossoms, visible on their skinny-necked stems, were popping up and a few bees were already working the territory. *Let this not be zucchini*, I prayed to Mother Nature. [It wasn’t—it was Sweet Mama winter squash.]

Around the Fourth of July, green swellings could be seen at the bases of the female blossoms. The solo plant had overrun the manure pile and was now racing along our dirt road, uphill and down. Every few days I policed the road’s edge and nipped back each of the brash tendrils that thought, like turtles, to cross the right-of-way. Thwarted in this direction, the heroic squash began to loop upward, mounting a huge stand of jewelweed in its eagerness to get at a telephone pole.

How about you? Did you discover in your garden what you expected to find—or did you encounter something entirely different and unexpected, like a renegade squash, bent on conquering the whole world? Sometimes we start out to do one thing, and learn that something different was waiting for us: something that helped us grow and change. Gardening is like that—full of glorious surprises.





Gardening and Writing: A Class in Miracles

“Once you care about gardens, birds, bugs, and flowers,” says Sharon Lovejoy, author of *Sunflower Houses: Garden Discoveries for Children of All Ages*, “you will never have a boring day. Even the tiniest experience can seem like a miracle.” To which I would like to add: Once you start writing about gardens, birds, bugs, and flowers, you will begin to see the world with new eyes—a child’s eyes, wide with wonder. You will be participating in a class in miracles.

What’s this all about? It’s about observing, of course, and writing down exactly what you see, without deciding whether what you write is good or bad, beautiful or ugly. And that is the very best kind of writing practice: observing attentively, seeing clearly, reporting exactly what is. When you do that—observe, see, report—you will have begun to be a writer. And if you can reach into your memories and observe that remembered garden with a child’s eye, you will open yourself to something delightful. Read this, from Sharon Lovejoy:

I am young again and sitting in the cool darkness of Grandmother’s early California bungalow...Outside, hummingbirds are dipping into the brilliant red bottlebrush as Grandmother grabs her old straw hat and looks over at me. I wait for the familiar words, ‘Let’s get buisy, Sharon, time to go outside and see just what’s happening in our garden.’ My heart still soars when I smell oatmeal cookies, freshly turned spring earth, carnations in full sunshine. I relive over and over the joys and surprises of each day in our garden. I can sit quietly and string those sweet garden thoughts together, memory upon memory, like my summer garlands of tiny pink rosebuds.

Watching our gardens grow, reflecting on gardens past, remembering who we were then, and where and why, we are inspired to write our memories, and to preserve them as if they were rare fruits. For that is what they are—fruits of our experience, of our learning, of our gains and losses. Fruits to be collected, observed, seen, and reported. Our garden fruits.



A Garden Journal

It’s probably not too far wrong to say that most good memoirs start with a journal. Pulling memories out of the past, unaided, is a little like dipping water out of a well without a bucket: a messy business, and sloppy, and so much of it is lost. Seasons in the garden, like seasons of our lives, have a way of blurring in memory. So if you’d like to write about your garden memories at some time in the future, the best time to begin is now.

*Brown and furry
Caterpillar in a hurry
Take your walk
To the shady leaf or stalk,
Or what not,
Which may be the chosen
spot.
No toad spy you,
Hovering bird of prey pass
by you;
Spin and die,
To live again a butterfly.*
—Christina Rossetti

*As we enter into exquisite
awareness of the life
that wants to live as us,
we learn to love deeply.
We claim our passion.—
Gunilla Norris*

*There was a child went forth
every day, and the first object
he look’d upon, that object he
became.—Walt Whitman*

*Each garden reaches its
moment of perfection. Here, it
happens in late June, when
tiny pea pods overlap on the
vines and the corn sprouts
hold beads of water trembling
in their chalice leaves. The
soil is rich as chocolate, and
light glows in the oakleaf
lettuce like sun through a
rabbit’s ear.—Beth Powning*

*I have everything I need. A
square of sky, a piece of stone,
a page, a pen, and memory
raining down on me.—Harriet
Doerr*

My mother gardened in a costume. She wore a suit of nubby white linen, white kid shoes, and a navy-blue bandanna. She carried a basket and a set of miniature tools. She weeded pots of petunias....I have found the sport of gardening lusty, sweaty, and hard. Sometimes I try to get around its central issue by doing what gardeners do in picture books. I bring home from the nursery little pots of flowers. Then I pose for my own future recollection as a pansy planter. Unhappily, a single hour is enough to plant three dozen pots of plants. What next? Maybe I treat myself to some pruning, which can, under the best of circumstances, be performed like an artist at his canvas, with many steppings back to cock the head, then circle round and again step forth to snip a twig or so. Or I might cut a bunch of roses, bring them into the house, arrange them in a bowl, pour a beer. But I know that's cheating.

The real work is weeding.—Sara Stein



Start with your present garden—whether it is a corner of your back yard, an acre in the country, or three pots on your windowsill—and begin to collect your observations and thoughts about it, on a daily basis. Writing in your garden journal every day is like tossing the coffee grounds on the compost heap every morning—it doesn't seem like much, day by day, but at the end of the year, there's a lot of compost to turn over. A year from now, or a decade, you'll find that you'll have a great many garden memories to mull over, and choose among, for a fine memoir. And in the meantime, there's all that information you're collecting, and all that writing practice. You can't lose!

How do you begin? Well, that's easy. Choose a notebook you'll enjoy writing in, a pen that fits your hand, and you're all set. Or if you like to work the high-tech way, start a new file on your word processor. However you choose to do it, write a little something every day. Once or twice a week, write a little something more—a couple of extra pages. Date every entry. Say something about the weather: hot, cold, in between, raining, snowing, it's all part of the garden experience. Focus on the facts first: what you planted, transplanted, pruned, harvested. If you have time, include a couple of sentences of garden observations, and something about yourself. After all, the gardener and the garden grow together. And don't just write! Clip, crayon, cartoon. Photograph, sketch, paint, press (leaves and blossoms, of course). And one more thing: if you can record a garden joy or a blessing every day—what a harvest you'll have in a few years!

And if you'd like to go further in your garden journaling, spend some time with the earlier exercise I suggested: write a history of *all* your gardens. Expand it with sketches, drawings, plant lists. Or you could write about the garden of your dreams—that garden you'd love to have, if you had the space or the time or the climate. Or you might experiment with a family garden journal. Wouldn't that be fun to read, in twenty or thirty years? It might even inspire a daughter or son to write her or his own memoir, growing out of the garden you showed them how to plant. Because it really is true that what comes around, goes around. Nobody knows that better than women who make compost out of their coffee grounds.—*Susan Wittig Albert*



Pen Partners & Round Robins

If you are looking for a pen partner with whom to share stories, we invite you to send your name, address, and a paragraph about your interests and we will print it. Please address Pen Partners. If you would like to participate in "Stories in the Round," a round-robin story-sharing project that may involve up to five people, let us know and we will forward your letter to a round robin coordinator.

True Words from Real Women

In this section of each Story Circle Journal, we publish your contributions of poetry and prose, published or unpublished. Write for our Writers' Guidelines, limber up your pen (or your computer), and send in your submissions. We want to hear your story!

My Mother's Garden

My mother was a homemaker and passionate gardener. For over thirty years, she filled her large walled garden with a changing succession of flowers and shrubs, during her last decade replacing the center rose bushes with stark topiary herons. That place seemed central to her existence. Although I'd never disdained plants, while she lived I took little interest in my townhouse garden, seeing myself as a career woman and fearing that I could not live up to her standards. Yet soon after she died, a desire to build my own thing of beauty seized me. As the landscaper questioned my husband and me about the design, the names of all the half-remembered treasures flowed urgently from my lips. "Yes, I want peonies, hyacinths, lilies, clematis, phlox, daisies, violets," I said. Later, I told my husband that I had just realized that whatever else I was doing, I was also creating a memorial. Now, six years later, I look down from my room and see her little stone turtle in my own happy valley, different in size yet the same in spirit as hers. How much I would love to tell her how much joy it has given me—and that I'm more like her than I thought.

Mary Faith Pankin
Arlington VA

In The Pale

Once in
every lifetime
comes a
magic moment
of clarity,
born out
of silence,
an infinite
understanding
of our order
in the pattern
of time,
a second
of spirituality,
glimpses of
unworldly knowledge.

Linda Tuttle
Asheville NC

Pruning

The sun shines warm on my modest garden and the finches flit 'round the feeders as I stand in my mesh old-lady's hat, favorite pruners in hand, contemplating the task before me.

Because I've struggled so hard in my life to survive, pruning is difficult for me. Cutting life from anything, even a rose bush, is painful. Of course, the bush I stand before is not just any bush. It is a child of mine—the stunted, scraggly twig that I found that first spring which had been pushed back and down by thistles when elderly Mrs. Robinson could no longer tend to her beloved garden. It is the one that, with patience and stamina, waited quietly among the weeds for a gentle hand to care for it. By the second summer, it strewed its deep magenta flowers about the herb garden, and for succeeding years it has provided the petals that accent my holiday potpourri. By last year I was accustomed to its usual bounty of blooms and was anticipating a copious harvest of petals. But much to my disappointment, not even one tiny bud appeared.

Instead, this bush struggled once more for survival against almost every scourge known to rosedom—powdery mildew, aphids, black spot and yellow leaf. And once again I came to its rescue. I cut the canes at an angle, sealed the open ends with glue, removed all the fungus-infected leaves and then sprayed the scourges. Finally I fertilized and mulched. Mostly, though, I talked to this rose child, told her I missed the flowers and asked for their return.

She has not disappointed me. Except for a few manageable aphids and a handful of yellow leaves, this season she is thriving with an abundance of buds—as many as eight—on the tip of each branch. And I know that to have large full blooms once again, I must prune back all but one bud on each stem. Yet as I carefully trim and seal, trim and seal, I cheat every so often, leaving two or three. I cannot bear to kill so many possibilities.

As I put away my gardening tools, I remember that I will be doing pruning of a different sort during the coming week. Tomorrow, I must call a business associate and turn aside the opportunity to supply her flower shop with potpourri. This is something I would have delighted to do a year ago. But like many other activities which I've recently cut from my life—substitute teaching, craft classes, neighborhood projects—this new business venture is being pruned before it has a chance to bloom.

Instead, I am choosing carefully these days so that only one blossom will be nourished in my life this season. I am reclaiming a different dream, one that has sat patiently, weed-choked by painful childhood memories for some forty years, one that is hungry for attention and cultivation, and one whose time has come now that children are grown and societal demands have been set aside. So I walk to my favorite wicker porch chair, pick up my pen and begin to write about my beloved rose bush—the one with the deep magenta blooms.

Evelyn Ayers-Marsh
Syracuse NY

Readers' Favorite Books

Are you writing your own story? Your work will be enriched and your experience deepened by reading the stories of other women. If you have discovered some particularly helpful books, we invite you to share the titles and authors' names with us, so that we can add them to our libraries, as well.

Susan Hansen, of San Marcos TX, teaches an 11-week class called "Writing Your Spiritual Geography" at her church. Required reading for the course is Kathleen Norris's book, **Dakota: A Spiritual Geography**. The other books Susan suggests to class members are works about nature, our human sense of place. Susan's list includes books by women and men. These are the books by women—personal stories about the geography of the soul:

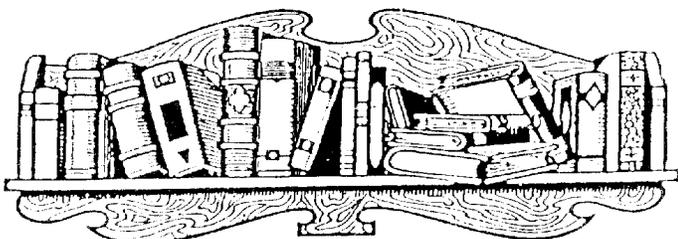
Diane Ackerman, **The Moon by Whalelight**
 Janice Emily Bowers, **A Full Life in a Small Place and Other Essays from a Desert**
 Sharon Butala, **The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature**
 Alison Hawthorne Deming, **Temporary Homelands**
 Annie Dillard, **Holy the Firm**
 _____, **Pilgrim at Tinker Creek**
 _____, **Teaching a Stone to Talk**
 Gretel Ehrlich, **A Match to the Heart**
 Sue Halpern, **Migrations to Solitude**
 Linda Hogan, **Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World**
 Sue Hubbel, **A Country Year**
 Donna Kappel-Smith, **Desert Time**
 Ann Linnea, **Deep Water Passage**
 Susan Fox Rogers, ed. **Another Wilderness: New Outdoor Writing by Women**
 Sara Stein, **Noah's Garden**
 Susan J. Baren Tweit, **Wild and Worthless: Living in the Chihuahuan Desert**
 Terry Tempest Williams, **Coyote's Canyon**
 _____, **Desert Quartet**
 _____, **Pieces of White Shell**
 _____, **Refuge**

Duffie Bart, of Monterey CA, shares a "short list of books I have loved. As you can see," she adds, "I'm mainly interested in personal growth and spirituality."

Jalala Bonheim, **Aphrodite's Daughters: Women's Sexual Stories and the Journey of the Soul**
 Rosemary Breslin, **Not Exactly What I Had in Mind**
 Vivian Gornick, **Approaching Eye Level**
 Katharine Graham, **Personal History**
 Jean Houston, **A Passion for the Possible**
 Vimama McClure, **The Tao of Motherhood**
 Sobonfu E. Some, **The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient Teachings in the Ways of Relationships**

On her website, CaroleAnn Lovin lists some helpful, encouraging, and often inspiring books on journal writing. You can find CaroleAnn's website at this address: <http://www.mindspring.com/~guide/bk-jrnl.html>

Anne H. Aldrich, **Notes to Myself: A Creative Guide to Journal Writing**
 Christina Baldwin, **Life's Companion: Journaling as a Spiritual Quest**
 _____, **One to One: Self-Understanding through Journal Writing**
 Joyce Chapman, **Journaling for Joy: Writing Your Way to Personal Growth**
 Kay Leigh Hagan, **Internal Affairs: A Journal Keeping Workbook for Self-Intimacy**
 Hannah Hinchman, **A Trail Through Leaves: The Journal as a Path to Place**
 Alexandra Johnson, **The Hidden Writer: Diaries and the Creative Life**
 Cathy Moore and Robin Bernstein, **Journal for Healing: Writing Through Pain and Illness**
 Rose Offner, **Journal to the Soul: The Art of Sacred Journal Keeping**
 Marlene Schiwy, **A Voice of Her Own: Women and the Journal Writing Journey**
 Tristine Rainer, **The New Diary: How to Use a Journal for Self Guidance and Expanded Creativity**



Books for the Journey

In each issue, we'll review one or more books that teach us something important about women's stories. Some will be related to the theme of the issue, others will simply be books we couldn't resist. If you would like to contribute, write for our Reviewers Guide.—Susan Albert

Leaning Into the Wind: Women Write from the Heart of the West, edited by Linda Hasselstrom, Gaydell Collier, and Nancy Curtis (Houghton Mifflin, 1997, ISBN 0-395-83738-3, \$25.00)

Real women are all around us, but we are so used to seeing through the spectacles of our stereotypes that we don't always recognize them. The editors of this grand and courageous anthology, three ranchwomen who got fed up with the way Western women are imagined ("slim blonds in tight jeans on prancing palominos, or musclebound heifers who look and smell like old leather"), have given us the Real Thing—and we all ought to be enduringly grateful. ***Leaning Into the Wind*** is an amazing collection of writing by women of the High Plains, a chorus of distinctive voices, each speaking her own strong language. In it you will read bits of memoir about milking, lame horses, cowmoms, and sleeping with the pigs. You'll hear chilling descriptions of weather and winter, poetry about coyotes singing, a recipe for bug spray—and throughout, the voices of extraordinary women working, loving, mothering, living. The editors sifted manuscripts from 550 women in six Western states—"a tower of submissions twelve feet high" that included photo albums, letters, handwritten pages, diaries, and more—to give us this collection.

And a marvelous collection it is, with sections such as "Growing into the Land," "Pay a Holy Kind of Attention," and "The River of Stories." But the only way to tell you about this rare book is to give you a taste of it. Here are a few bits and pieces to whet your appetite for more:

The cow pivoted in the center of the corral, refusing to let me get behind her. The last thing I needed right now was a modest cow.

I could have used a warm breeze instead of the icy wind. Or grass underfoot—that would have been easier to walk over than powdery snow and frozen manure. But most of all, I could have used a glimpse into the future the day we decided to double our beef herd.—*Audrey A. Keith*

My Aunt Mary told me that she never saw my mother sit down unless she was breast-feeding one of us. She did not have the time or energy to care for so many children. Her sixth child was a son, which made my father happy; the baby lived only eight months.

After five years on the North Dakota homestead my mother was committed to an asylum in Jamestown, where she died three years later...In the asylum, my mother gave birth to her seventh child, a daughter. Friends of the family adopted her.—*Ann Vontz*



My life is about distances, rough landscapes so vast that many whole snowstorms can be watched at once, separated by fair skies. My story is about a human being living in many kinds of wind; the breathtaking perfection of wildflowers so small no one has given them a name; sagebrush hills where hundreds of antelopes look like tiny sparkles of reflected sunlight as they migrate through the frozen ghost of an ancient sea.—Dawn Senior

On the plains, in the mountains, you learn that you are as important as the beaver, the hawk, the dragonfly—but not more so. You are part of the circle.—Gaydell Collier

Why is it home? We belong to the land. It holds us with killdeer luring us away from their nests with drooping wings and pitiful cries. Nothing smells as good as the earth after a rain, although sweet clover comes mighty close. Sunflowers mature with a pungent aroma. We scoop up a handful of rich black earth and squeeze it, not just to judge it, but for the pleasure of feeling it.—Audrey Keith

Return to Elk Mountain

My future is this holy place where the mountains of my past scrape the sky of my present.

Here, in the silence between the trees.

—*Kay Moon*

Books for the Journey—from page 13

We plainswomen are realistic and romantic, tender and strong. Our small hands are invaluable when a calf needs to be repositioned and pulled. We haul kids to rodeos and watch them climb onto twelve hundred pounds of horse to try to make that eight-second ride, loving their determination but dreading the danger. On the way out the door to a school board meeting, we kill a rattlesnake waiting for us on the porch steps. We deal with life and death, and we respect both... We are place-bound because we are not whole anywhere else and because there are familiar graves here.—Karen Obrigewitch

Being a ranch woman means being an all-around woman. —Jann Potter

Flood, drought, wind, hail, tornado, fire, financial trauma—we suffered them all, each in turn slicing still another sliver from my heart until I thought my heart was dead, it must be dead, had to be dead, for survival depends upon courage and resilience and fortitude and I had none of those. A hollowness of soul crept in, leaving me bereft and lonely and alone.

I don't know where it went, that utter despair, that dryness of the soul. It's gone now, disappeared like a shadow at noon. I misplaced it somewhere in that whispering sea of grass, somewhere among the bare-root pines, or perhaps at dusk among the wild lilies in the gray-gumbo prairie. It was lost in the sinking of roots into the hard sod—a simple thing, after all, to anchor, to stay. It just takes a leaning into the wind.—Rose Kremers

I carry the ranch inside me. I can close my eyes and see every sticky weed around our house, the gopher holes, the path to the coal house and the privy. And I can feel my feet on the path as I run barefoot from our house to the ranch house where the corrals wedge against the cottonwoods that line the river... Could there have been any other kind of childhood? There would have been no frontier in my mind, no wide open space that led on and on.—*Phyllis Luman Metal*

The prairie is in me like the dirt is in the earth.—*Bernie Koller*

I've loved good men and rode good horses.—*Karen Obrigewitch*

Just give me a vaccine gun in each hand and stand back!—*Jody Strand*

This is the story I want to tell you. The land helped save me. The fine dust like hot powder between my toes. The earth smelling of decaying roots and honeycombed with tunnels of wormholes. Daytime mud puddles alive with black tadpoles; the nighttime thrumming of toad concerts. The lone nightingale. The meadowlarks, red-winged blackbirds, and mourning doves. Ice storms, and the crystal-pink glowing midnight hour of an aurora borealis. All this, and the storms over the high plains.—*Morgan Songi*

Dear heavenly Father,
I've been thinking it over and I
Just don't know.
Are there horses in heaven
or hayfields to mow?
In this sweet black soil
How the roots grow!

Maybe for me,
less than eternity
if I could just stay.
Earth is enough.
My hands are restless
and rough;
All wrong for the harp anyway.
—*Donna Parks*

These stories ring with authority, truth, anger, fear, sadness, longing, strength. They are the authentic stories of women whose lives are living testimony to the way the roots grow in the sweet soil of the High Plains, under the shadow of the mountain, “between God and the ground.” They show us that Earth can be enough, and teach us how to live our lives in the spaces between necessity and hope.



A Story Circle News Roundup

Good stories have the power to save us.... We can all make a difference by simply sharing our stories with real people in real times and places.—*Mary Pipher*

Story Circles come in all sizes, from an intimate and informal gathering of friends over coffee and notebooks to the larger, more formal organization of a class. Whether your group is large or small, we would love to hear from you. Drop us a note and tell us where you're located, what you are doing, and what you have learned from your Story Circle work. Please give a name, address, and phone number of a contact, so that others may get in touch. Remember: a story about your experience in a Story Circle will help someone else imagine herself in a Story Circle—perhaps one that she has created herself, with your example to guide her and your encouragement to inspire her! Also remember: Story Circles qualify for quantity discount on Writing From Life and free copies of The Story Circle Journal. Write to us for details.

Kathy Mayer facilitates a Story Circle at the Morton Community Center in West Lafayette IN. There are fifteen members of her group, which meets weekly on Monday evenings. Kathy writes that she is using Susan's book, Writing From Life, and adds this comment:

"Most did not know each other before the workshop began. We're now in our fourth week, and the energy is flowing and connections forming. Thank you for a powerful text to guide our way!"

Kathy, who owns a writing and public relations firm, can be reached by writing to PO Box 1135, Lafayette IN 47902, or calling 317-423-1393.



A church community is a perfect setting for a Story Circle, and the energies gained there have the potential of energizing (and changing?) the whole church. Judie Hansen tells us that the women of the Unitarian Universalist Community Church in Danville IN have organized a group.

"We decided to meet twice a month on Thursday evenings," she says. "The option is to attend the yoga class from 5:30 to 6:30, then have a 'bring your own sandwich' supper at 7:00 and begin the Circle at 7:30—body, mind, and spirit working together." Judie adds, with a chuckle, "To appreciate how popular this idea was, it might help to let you know that we only have 22 women members in our church—so more than half will be involved in the Story Circle—and boy, won't we be a force to be reckoned with once we get to know each other better!"



If you're looking for a Story Circle in the Wayne NJ area, contact Elizabeth Conrad Dispenza, at PO Box 692, Wayne NJ 07470 or 201-872-2624. She's hoping to start a writing group "based on the desire to tell our stories against a background of community," she told us in a recent letter. "Although writing is a solitary pursuit, the writer eventually wants to be heard through an audience."

In Austin TX, Elizabeth Bishop facilitates a group called Sanctuary: A Story Circle for Women. In her flyer, she writes:

"This workshop is an invitation to explore in the quietness of your heart—and with other women—questions about yourself that no one (including yourself) may have asked you. The topics are simple. The power comes from the energy of fresh and honest writing, then sharing that electric moment (if you so choose) in the sanctuary of a circle of other women also writing from the wellsprings of their lives."

Elizabeth is a psychotherapist in private practice and a published writer whose fiction has won the Houston Festival Words Alive! Prose Award. She has kept a journal since 1980. Writing, she has discovered, is necessary for her soul.



Evelyn Cook and Barbara Holman, in The Woodlands TX, have convened a Story Circle called Gatherings From the Vineyard. The group meets in a conference room at the local library. The flyer they sent tells us:

"Meetings will include friendly interaction, quiet reflection, discussion, reading, questions, observations. The group is not designed to improve the quality of writing, though this can happen. It is a place to speak plainly about stories we have to tell ourselves—where others can say 'I've been there, too.'"

For information, write to Evelyn Cook, 20 Rosethorn Place, The Woodlands, TX 77381.

Beginning a Story Circle is as easy as picking up the phone and inviting a few friends for an evening of writing, reading, sharing! Helpful start-up tips for working with Susan's book, *Writing From Life* (and a quantity discount on book purchases) are available in our 12-page brochure, **A Guide for Story Circle Facilitators**. To receive your copy, send \$1 (to cover printing and mailing) to Story Circle Network, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605.

Our Readers Share Their Stories....



Some thoughts on Story Circles, from members of Carol Abbassi's Story Circle, in Austin TX...

A Story Circle is window shopping and stopping to look, with the reflections of fellow shoppers showing in the window. You are looking at the same items but seeing and recalling different things—memories, experiences, hurts, and hopes.

To belong to a Story Circle is to be able to sit quietly in a corner and listen with only your heart protesting the sameness of your same experience. Or be free to speak out where some other will listen politely or even attentively to what your heart cries out—not only a chance to be heard by a listening ear but also a chance to hear, expressed by your own not too familiar voice, those innermost, long-buried thoughts, ideas, fears, and dreams.

A trip around the world is exciting—but not half as exciting as the journeys we write about and share in Story Circle.

A Story Circle is a group—friendly, non-threatening, revealing, sharing, supporting and challenging...all the things you can't be when you are telling stories with only yourself as an audience.

Charlotte Hamrick, New Orleans

My early life was a river, running from

place to place. My adult life has been a lake—calm, comforting, and dependable. Now I'm ready for the ocean, to move, change, and renew. I am interested in exchanging ideas and comments with others on the craft of writing and receiving feedback on my own efforts.

Barbara Long, Washington DC

I am leaving my government job and moving to another city after nearly 25 years. In trying to decide what to do with my future, I am studying my past. Please send me information about how to start a Story Circle. When I'm settled, I want to introduce other women to life-writing.

Clarice Young, San Diego CA

I have so many stories to tell about my experiences, but it is hard because I'm afraid to open them up to the light of day. *Writing From Life* has been a big help, but a Story Circle would help me even more. Please let me know how to start one. Does it cost anything?

We've mailed information to both Clarice and Barbara—and no, it doesn't cost anything to create a Circle! If you'd like to a copy of our booklet on getting started, check out the box on page 15.

Cheryl Sheesley, Vintondale PA

For a long time, books were my closest friends and writing was the only

method of expressing deep feelings and concerns. Even now, few of my friends share my interests or the degree of interest I have in spirituality and creativity...I see the *Story Circle Journal* as yet another source of hope on my life's journey to assist me with the steps ahead, encouraging me to keep going as I face the unknown nature of what lies ahead.

Mandy Richards, Miami

Just a note to let you know how much I am enjoying *The Story Circle Journal*—especially the articles by Susan Wittig Albert. Each one is different, yet each seems to speak to me and remind me of important things I need to write about. I would also like to have the names of books to read, since books are such an important part of my journey right at this moment.

Thanks for your comment, Mandy. We hope you will enjoy the book lists contributed by readers (page 12), as well as the book review section. And how about contributing a list of your own favorite books? We hope to be able to expand our list of books to something like a Readers' Companion, and to develop a book list suitable for Story Circle Reading Groups. Please help us out!

This membership is a gift.
My name and address:

Please send me ____ free copies of the *Story Circle* brochure to share with friends and clients.

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