



Story Circle Journal

Volume 2 Number 2

The newsletter for women who have stories to tell...

Getting Our Act Together—Together!

New organizations always have a lot of growing to do—which often means rethinking their organizational strategies. Story Circle Network is no different. With a full year's operation under our belts, we think we might finally be getting our act together. But we are learning that the *best* act is the one we get together—together.

In our last issue, we told you about our newly enlarged board of directors and our plans for a program of spring classes. Now, that board has begun to talk about reaching out to others—encouraging others to join us in our work and finding significant others whose efforts *we* might join. One of our first steps in this direction was a meeting with a representative of the Ophelia Project, an Austin-based organization dedicated to helping adolescent girls develop and maintain a healthy self-esteem and to combatting the forces of culture and the media that undermine girls' sense of self. We can see many ways in which girls' stories are shaped by the stories they hear all around them—stories about how girls ought to behave, what they should look like and wear, how they should think and feel. Many of these stories are unhealthy, even toxic. We hope that by cooperating with the Ophelia Project—by offering programs, classes, and workshops in life-writing for girls and their parents—we can encourage girls to write their *own* stories, instead of letting the media and the culture dictate their stories to them.

Funded projects are another important way we are joining our efforts with those of other organizations. Last month, the Story Circle Network wrote a major grant proposal, requesting \$100,000 to create a series of memoir-writing workshops for women over 60. If the proposal is funded and the project (called OWL, or Older Women's Legacy Circle) goes forward, the participants will be using a specially-written workbook that will help them write their life stories and create and self-publish their own small books. The project will allow the Story Circle Network to join forces with senior organizations in Central Texas and—through its website—with senior organizations across the country and throughout the world. We'll be able to tell you in about six months whether our proposal will be funded. But however it turns out, the process of writing it has helped us learn more about who we are and what we want to do.

Board members have been talking about yet another way of getting our act together—together. In its original charter, the Story Circle Network was not incorporated as a membership organization. Over the next few months, we will be discussing possible changes to our charter. We will also be talking about the possibility of developing local chapters of the Network in various cities around the country—perhaps in *your* city, with your help. This is an exciting prospect,

—continued on page 2

The trouble is, if you don't risk anything, you risk even more.
—Erica Jong

We all have the extraordinary coded within us, waiting to be released.—
Jean Houston



In This Issue

- Getting Our Act Together....1*
- The Story Circle Network.....2*
- Seeing Double....3*
- A Diarist's Year....4*
- Minding Our Own Business....5*
- Telling Family Stories....10*
- True Words/Real Women....11*
- Books for the Journey....12*
- Story Circle News RoundUp....14*
- Readers Share Their Stories....15*

Together!—from Page 1

because it can allow us to multiply our individual efforts and support and encourage one another in more personal and immediate ways. But the work involved in developing and sustaining a new, unique, and truly national women's organization is enormous, and we all have to think about how we can make time in our already busy personal and professional lives for such an important commitment.

In June, the board will be holding its first retreat to discuss these exciting and bold ideas and to shape our shared vision of the Network's future. But however these dreams turn out, we know there's nothing we can't do—together!

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 I 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, in each issue of the newsletter
- ◇ **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 I 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 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 I 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.

***You're on the Net?
So are we!
Visit us at
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.

Editor: Susan Wittig Albert

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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!

Seeing Double: Writing from

For most of us, a photograph is a way of holding the past in our hands—seeing what happened, when, with whom. Photos are a testimony to a time now gone, and to our intimate connection with people who may no longer be alive. They are a way of “seeing double”—recalling past events and reliving them in the present. For those of us who want to write about our lives, photographs can be a fine resource.



hadn't? Is there something in the photo that gives you a clue to this more problematic aspect of the relationship? Perhaps there is something in the posture, in the facial expression, in the setting, that helps you see something different. Viewing the past from your present perspective may help you to uncover a different understanding of the events and relationships you have experienced.

Using Photos to Remember

Here today, gone tomorrow—the past is as slippery and hard to hold as a wet fish. But when we have a photo to write from, our memory of the past may become much clearer—or we may find something new to notice, some new discovery about the past that has eluded us.

Try this: find a favorite photo of yourself with someone who has influenced you—your mother, your father, a much-loved aunt, a husband or lover. Look at it for a moment, thinking about your relationship with the person and putting yourself back into the perspective of the girl or woman you were at that time. Then write. Who were you, back then? Who was this person? Why was he or she important to you then? What lessons did you learn, at that time, from him or her?

A Later Perspective

As you wrote the passage above, you were seeing the photograph from the point of view of the person you were at the time it was taken. Now, let's try a different perspective, take a later point of view. We know that influential relationships are often double-edged: that is, we may be influenced to change in ways that might not be altogether right for us. Look at the photo again, but this time from the point of view of the woman you are now. How might your life have been different if the person in the photo had not been there? What did you learn from this person that you now wish you

Seeing Double: Finding the Truth

We've all heard the old saying, “Photographs don't lie.” But this isn't always true. In a workshop a few years ago, an older woman named Pearl brought a photo of herself as a small child, sitting on her mother's lap. Both were smiling, both looked happy. “But those smiles were lies,” Pearl wrote. “My father had abandoned both of us. We had no money and we were afraid. But Mother didn't want her parents to know how bad it was, so she sent them the photo to show that we were doing fine. ‘Just keep smiling,’ she would say, ‘and nobody will know the difference.’ Deception was the first lesson I had to unlearn,” Pearl adds, when I began to search for my real self.”

If you look through your photograph collection, you may find one that you can “see double”—that is, one you can see with the eyes of the person you were then, *and* with the eyes of the person you are now. What truth can you find in this photo? What new thing does it show you about the past through which you have lived?

Memoir Albums

If you have lots of photos, you might consider assembling a memoir album: a book of photos and your interpretations of the people and the events depicted—together with your own history, of course. You may be surprised by what you learn from this. Photographs can be a key to the treasures, and the traumas, of the deeply buried past.—*Susan Albert*

THE PAST IN PICTURES

You can learn a great deal about your past by studying the photos you have collected, particularly those of the family you grew up in. Use these questions to help you get started writing.

Who?

Who are the people in the photographs? If you know them, write a paragraph or two about them: who they are, where they lived, how they were connected to you. If you don't know them, ask family members to help with identification. Pay attention to the details of dress, posture, facial expression: these silent messages often speak very loudly.

Where and When?

Where were these photographs taken? What scenes are depicted? What do these tell you about the people? What years were the photos made? How old were you? What details of the period are evident in dress, vehicles, furniture, etc.? What can you write about the time and the place?

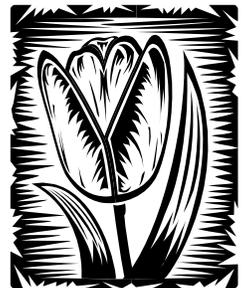
What?

Photographs often commemorate important family occasions: weddings, funerals, reunions, holidays. What are the occasions of the photos you have collected? What family rituals are being celebrated? What does this tell you about your family's ethnic background, religious beliefs, economic and social class? How do you feel about these occasions now, as you look back on them? Write about the events, including not just the

The Journaling Page
a diarist's year
 a guest column by **lisa shumicky**

My writing goes through seasons (plant, cultivate, harvest, fallow)
 & yours probably does too.

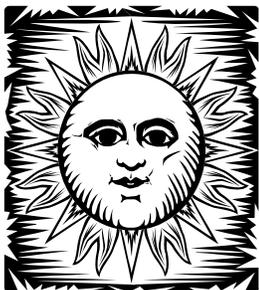
In **spring** I always think of *Flat Rock Journal: A Day in the Ozark Mountains* by Ken Carey. "...and so it happened that we began a tradition. Every year, on certain mornings in April or early May, one or the other of us will throw a few things in a backpack and set out to enjoy a day in the forest...I remember things in the forest, things I never intended to forget. Things that, as a child, I would not have believed could be forgotten." and *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* by Robert Fulghum. "Each spring, for many years, I have set myself the task of writing a personal statement of belief: a Credo."



I take my own *lisa's journal* out into the woods.
 I attempt to write my own credo.

The notebook and the self move outside. I start keeping track of my garden or writing entries about various garden tools and flowers. I hope for days warm enough to sit on the patio and write (or on a porch, on a deck, on a log). I yearn for color. I think of SARK's* rainbow of published books and look for magic markers to "play" with in my own journal. I write lists of signs of spring, and lists of everything I can see that's green.

I think metaphorically of rebirth, seeds, growth,
 time changing, spring fever, spring cleaning.



In **summer** my favorite book is Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift From the Sea*. I've reread it every summer since I found it (or it found me) in graduate school in 1981, and every year I find something else to think about, ie. comment on in my journal. In fact, several years ago I started keeping a separate notebook of my (annual) responses to/experiences with *Gift From the Sea*, including attempting to find my own gifts & trying to write in imitation of Anne Morrow Lindbergh.

Is there a book you'd like to return to this summer, to cull new
 (and perhaps surprising) insights from?



In **autumn**, I turn to Hannah Hinchman's A Trail Through Leaves (and look forward to our own traditional hikes on trails through leaves). Hannah Hinchman encourages her readers (in her earlier book, A Life In Hand too) to sketch. She firmly believes anyone can do it. She offers many suggestions on how to incorporate this into your notebook.

One of my favorite things that she says is "Sit still,
& let Nature happen around you."

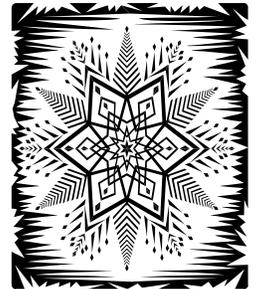
Think of leaves, turning a new leaf, shedding, harvest, bounty, fruit, pilgrim(age)s.

Put it all in your diary. Put a REAL leaf in too—
flatten it and keep it in place with clear contact paper.
Be thankful.

What acorns are you gathering to sustain you through the winter?

In **winter**, one (this one, anyway) turns inward. I love to contemplate the lives and experiences of solitary women like May Sarton (Journal of a Solitude), Alice Koller (An Unknown Woman, Stations of Solitude), Doris Grumbach (Fifty Days of Solitude).

Think about darkness, & the death of a year and what you'd like the new one to contain. Sit by the fireplace, or light a candle, and remember your year. Record the highlights and turning points in your notebook. Be aware of GIFTS, they're everywhere. Count your blessings.



What can the bare trees teach you?
How are you like them?
How not?

Write about the first snowflake you ever tasted.
Write about the first one you taste *this* winter.

As SARK* says, **Live Juicy.**

*SARK is Susan Ariel Rainbow Kennedy. lisa shumicky is a writer/librarian who coordinates the National Journal Network, a group of committed diarists who share between and among themselves. Annual membership is \$15 and includes a 20-30 page newsletter. For further information, write to lisa shumicky, 32 Fischer Avenue, Islip Terrace NY

Minding Our Own Business

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 a form similar to the chapters of **Writing From Life**, offering ideas and topics for your writing, examples 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 your experience, pull out those memories, and open a new chapter in the story of your life.

Right Livelihood, in both its ancient and its contemporary sense, embodies self-expression, commitment, mindfulness, and conscious choice. Finding and doing work of this sort is predicated upon high self-esteem and self-trust, since only those who like themselves, who subjectively feel they are trustworthy and deserving, dare to choose on behalf of what is right and true for them....When we consciously choose to do work we enjoy, not only can we get things done, we can get them done well and be intrinsically rewarded for our effort. Money and security cease to be our only payments.—Marsha Sinetar

If I had known that having it all would be like this, I would have settled for less.—Lily Tomlin

Take your work seriously, but never yourself.—Dam Margot Fonteyn

Writing A History of Your Work



For most of us, working is like breathing. We have done it for most of our adult lives, and we expect to go on doing it for quite a while to come. After all, we like to have food on the table and a roof over our heads—and that's what work gives us. And of course, our work can give us a great deal more than that: joy and personal satisfaction, a feeling of accomplishment, a sense of purpose, of hope, of expectation.

But work doesn't always repay us in these wonderful ways. Even though I was a successful college teacher and administrator, earning more money than I had ever expected to find in my paycheck, my work life was so stressful and constraining that I had no energy left for the rest of my life. Now that I've left that job for full-time writing, I've found a new and vital happiness in my work. To use a very old and honorable phrase, I've been fortunate enough to find my Right Livelihood. Perhaps you've also been able to discover interesting, productive work, work that gives you pleasure as well as contributing to your economic well-being. Or perhaps you have found yourself working in an unhealthy environments, or occupying positions that offer few creative challenges, or moving from one job to another without a clear sense of direction. Writing about our work is a good way to understand the role it has played in our lives and to learn how our stories have been shaped by our efforts to find or create the most meaningful work for ourselves. In fact, most women today could write an entire chapter in their memoirs, and maybe even more, just about the work they have done in their lives!

To get started on your own chapter about work, let's begin, as we often do, by making what we might call an "annotated list." Do you have a resume? If you do, you might want to take it out and look it over before you try this piece of writing. (If you don't, perhaps this exercise will help you construct one.) Let's do this: sit for a moment and think over your work history, remembering the jobs you've done in your life, those you have been paid to do and those you have done as an unpaid volunteer—or draftee! Then write them down, in date order, including your job title (if you had one), a short summary of your responsibilities, and perhaps the location of your work, if that was important. And don't forget to include child care and housework, if that has been part of your paid or unpaid work experience—as it has for most of us. (In fact, you might agree with many women who say that the hardest job of all is balancing the work they do to earn a living with their responsibilities at home. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls our homework "the second shift", and I personally think

Describing Your Challenges

If you're like most women, you've held a variety of jobs, and each has offered a different kind of challenge. Let's look at our work history from a different perspective, then: from the point of view of the kinds of challenges we have met in our work. Glance back over your list and choose two or three jobs that seem to you to have offered the greatest difficulty and the most challenge. Write a paragraph about each of these, describing in detail what you did and why it challenged you. The first of the following examples was written in a workshop. The second is from an interview I included in my book *Work of Her Own*:

I drove a taxi in New York City to put myself through college. The scheduling flexibility was perfect for me—I could get a cab when I didn't have classes—and the customers liked it that a woman was driving and gave me good tips. But the other drivers were a real challenge. I was nineteen, they were in their forties and fifties, and they'd never worked with a woman. They'd see to it that my gas was short, or that I got the cab with the bad tires, or that I had to wait for my driver's sheet. Or they'd make these really filthy jokes. The biggest challenge was ignoring those remarks! Now, I'd take them to court for it, but back then, all you could do was ignore it. It took a long time for them to decide they couldn't get to me, and for me to prove myself.—Rosa J.

Being a mother-at-home is the lowest-paid, most difficult, and most challenging and rewarding job I've ever done. I also babysit for another little boy six hours a week, so my personal income went from seventy thousand dollars a year three years ago [as the vice-president of a data-processing firm] to twenty-four dollars a week today. My days are full and extremely busy—my day-to-day problems are much tougher now than when I had a staff of thirty-five. But I'm convinced that it's very important for me to be home. A lot of healing has been going on in the family since I quit my job.—Marsha M.

I'm sure that if you look back over your list of jobs, you'll find challenges that are as difficult as these, and maybe more so. Your work history—and your memoir—won't be complete until you have written about them. And of course, the more varied your work has been over the course of your life, the more varied your challenges have been as well. Write about as many as you can, including as much richly detailed information as you remember. It's the detail that makes the difference. It gives the reader the sense of being there with you, participating in the experience and sharing your feelings.

One of my favorite memoirs of a woman's work life is called *Windbreak: A Woman Rancher on the Northern Plains*, by Linda Hasselstrom. It is the story of the daily challenge of facing an unbelievably difficult job and finding beauty in it. Here is a passage that I picked almost at random from Hasselstrom's book. Notice the level of detail, the matter-of-fact tone in which she describes what happens, the vivid contrast between the beauty of the autumn and the grim reality of death. Would you be able to handle this difficult on-the-job challenge

Opportunities are usually disguised by hard work, so most people don't recognize them.—Ann Landers

Life's challenges are not supposed to paralyze you; they're supposed to help you discover who you are.—Bernice Johnson Reagon

Life is change. Growth is optional. Choose wisely.—Karen Kaiser Clark

Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. Where there is love and inspiration, don't think you can go wrong.—Ella Fitzgerald.

Without courage you cannot practice any of the other virtues.—Maya Angelou

Making peace is the most difficult work of all.
—Hanan Mikhail Ashrawi

When it comes to getting things done, we need fewer architects and more brick layers.
—Colleen C. Barrett

This is a country where women have won the right to be terminally exhausted. But we can start to say things to ourselves and our employers like “Two of us can share a job” and “Why do we have to go to an office?” There really isn’t as much reason anymore. The day the FAX machine came into our lives, everything changed. We can work in a closet or anywhere.
—Sally Jessy Raphael

We are not interested in the possibility of defeat.
.—Queen Victoria

Failure is impossible.
—Susan B. Anthony

Find out what your most magnificent qualities are and make them indispensable to the people you want to work with. Notice that I didn’t say “work for.”
—Linda Bloodworth-Thomason

Only she who attempts the absurd can achieve the impossible.
—Sharon Schuster

and still have the energy to write about it at the end of the day?

I got up at six to drive out and check the cows. All the autumn grasses are wet from the rain, and the colors bright and clear: red, pale fawn, tan, shades for which there are no names. A silver moon hung in the west. Then I came in and found a cow down on her back in the corral with a dead calf half born. I got George to help me try to roll her over, but she died while we were struggling to get a grip on her. She was a fairly young cow and always a good mother. We dragged her to the boneyard in the afternoon. Father always says, “Never count the dead ones,” but if we’d gotten up sooner we might have saved her.

It may be difficult for women to write about the jobs that have challenged us because we are sometimes reluctant to describe negative situations or to show ourselves doing what our grandmothers might have called “unladylike” work. But the history of women’s work is full of “unladylike” challenges: getting our hands dirty, doing a man’s job for a woman’s pay, dealing with life and death in a long, exhausting cycle. To tell your story truly, you need to tell *all* your experiences—especially the most challenging!

Naming Your Achievements

Implicit in our challenges are our achievements, for women have a way of rising to the occasion when we are confronted by a job that seems too tough or too big for us to handle. The true story of your work will include not only descriptions of what you’ve done and the challenges you’ve met, but the story of your achievements as well—the things that make you feel proud and happy when you think about them, years afterward.

So let’s go back to the list again. Now, for each of the jobs you have listed, write down one achievement that you recall with pride. (Of course, if you can think of more than one achievement, write them down too—but be sure to write at least one, even if it is only “I stuck with it all the way!”) As you look back over your achievements, what do they show about your strengths and capabilities? What kind of worker have you been in your life?

Some of the jobs you have done may have brought a special pride in what you were able to accomplish, and you might like to write about those achievements. Here are two examples:

I was an oil-field geologist in the days before women got into that sort of thing. It was tough going, because the men I worked with were determined that I was going to fail and get fired. I still remember one of the difficult projects I got assigned to, which meant spending two months in the desert under very difficult conditions, with a group of men who didn’t want me there. But I did my job and it was my analysis that made the difference in the end. The guys on the team never became my friends, but they had to respect my competence and my

stubbornness.—Melinda S.

Starting the company was rough, and it was the wrong time, considering that the bottom had just fallen out of the economy. Eventually, I had to bail out, and I lost a lot of money. But now that I look back on it, I realize how much I learned and how much I achieved—going heads-up for the big contracts, managing a difficult group of people, organizing jobs, calling the shots. I did it *all*, and by golly I'm proud of it!—Helen G.

Too often, when we're looking back over our pasts, we remember only (or mostly) the failures. Naming our achievements is a powerful tool for helping us to understand what we gained from our experiences, even—or maybe especially—the traumatic ones!

What Else?

If you're looking for ways to expand your chapter on work, there's plenty else to write about. Try writing paragraphs on some of these topics:

- how you got the training for your work
- people you've worked with
- friends you've made on the job
- difficult conditions or environments
- the best job you ever had
- discrimination or injustice in your workplace
- your efforts to break through the glass ceiling
- your efforts to juggle work and family responsibilities
- your personal definition of Right Livelihood

Your life story won't be complete, or completely true, unless you write honestly and authentically about the work you have done, the challenges you have met, and the successes you have achieved. Of course, writing too is work—sometimes the hardest work of all—but it will give you an equal measure of pleasure. Go for it!—Susan Albert

Susan is the author of Work of Her Own: A Woman's Guide to Success off the Career Track (Tarcher/Putnam, 1992). You may purchase a copy of this book for \$16 postpaid. Send your check to Story Circle, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605.

I think success has no rules, but you can learn a lot from failure.
—Jean Kerr

To be successful, the first thing to do is fall in love with your work.
—Sister Mary Lauretta

Right livelihood is work that we choose to do because we want to do it—not because it is currently fashionable, or pays a great deal of money, or because Father approves, or because it was the best available. Right livelihood is chosen thoughtfully, mindfully, with a full understanding of our needs, the needs of those we care for, the needs of the earth. Right livelihood is work that challenges us to grow as wholehearted persons at the same time that it challenges us to develop an ever-widening range of skills and knowledge. Right livelihood is work that pays enough, by standards of reasonable consumption. And right livelihood is work through which we affirm that we are caring, compassionate citizens of our communities, our nation, and our planet.

—Susan Wittig Albert
Work of Her Own: A Woman's Guide to Success off the Career Track

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.

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

November, 1998—Soul Foods (deadline 10/1/98)

February, 1999—Creativity (deadline 01/99)

Telling Family Stories

by Dianne S. Lodge-Peters



Everybody tells family stories, sometimes to themselves on the pages of a personal journal and sometimes to their kinfolk at family reunions. Whatever the occasion, one reason we tell stories is so that our children can see and hear who they are, where they come from and where they belong. Telling family stories shows what we value and hope for, as well as how we survive. One way to discover what family stories are yours to tell is to think about three “I”s: influence, items, and images.

The first “I” is for *influence*, the ancestors or kinfolk who influenced the direction your life has taken. Who were the wise men and women in your family? How did they influence your life? Were they like fairy godparents or folk-tale characters? Were they stiff-corseted maiden aunts or long-lost uncles come home from far away? Recall those people in words, on the pages of your journal. Tell a story about them.

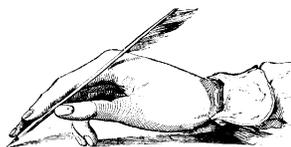
The second “I” is for *items*, the objects or heirlooms handed down from one generation to the next. Not just pieces of jewelry, china teapots, or silver serving plates, but a special spoon for dipping

home-made Christmas candies, a set of spice jars an aunt brought home from Prague, or a walking stick named Simon who traveled the Dolomites with your grandmother—stories stick to items like these. How did they get into the family? Under what circumstances? Tell the stories to your journal as well as to your grandchild. That way, your grandchild’s grandchild will be able to hear you from the page.

The third “I” is for *images*, the pictures that pop into your mind whenever you remember a person or a place. Do you look at your family tree and see certain faces shining or sneering through the leaves? Or does your mind’s eye return again and again to a snapshot of you and your favorite cousin building sandcastles at the beach cottage that later Hurricane Hugo swept out to sea. These mind-pictures are like illustrations for stories. Jot them down next to the snapshot you just fastened to a journal page.

These three “I”s—*influence*, *items*, and *images*—are sure-fire ways to collect your own family stories into a journal or memoir that can, if you wish, be handed down to future generations. Imagine what an item of influence that gift would be!

Dianne Lodge-Peters, who was featured in the Pen Partners column of the February issue of the Story Circle Journal, offers life-writing classes and workshops in Brewton, AL. For information about her classes and



Dear Pen Partner...

This column is for women seeking an exchange of letters. We will run it in every issue that we have pen partner names to offer. Are you on e-mail? Include your e-mail address. Maybe we can get some virtual e-Circles going!

“My name is Heather Young and I want to correspond with someone who can appreciate ‘snail mail.’ I enjoy writing short stories and poetry, and I’m working on writing my life story. I love discussing the deeper meanings of everyday life, and the journey of self-discovery. I’ll soon be 47, and though I am part of a large family, have no children myself. I find pleasure in reading and working counted cross-stich. Write to me at 4027 Kentshire Ln., Dallas TX 75287-5015. My e-mail address: hnfdy@cyberramp.net.”

True Words from Real Women

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

Old Yellow Dog

I woke up this morning
 with an old yellow dog
 draped round my brain.
 Asking 'whatifs,' posing 'ifonlys,'
 and humping my heart
 with problems.
 Time was, he would stay there
 for days, weeks,
 sometimes months.
 Now, I know I have choices.
 I'll douse him with caffeine,
 ignore him, exercise, create,
 tune in to inner light.
 By then, old yellow dog
 is nowhere to be seen.
 I can enjoy my day.
 He is not shared with friends.
 Some have dragons
 sitting on shoulders.
 Don't need old yellow dogs
 wrapped round their brains.
 He's just my sad, bad habit.
 I'll teach old dog new tricks.

Patricia Fiske
 Austin TX

To Sarah II

You loved me with a love
 that held like chains.

 I felt like a kite
 tied with a strong cord
 just let out a little
 then pulled back

 You never understood
 there was enough love to go around.

 Just because I loved
 didn't mean I loved you less.

 I kept secret who I really loved
 and why because
 you would never understand.

Nellie Hufford Ruby
 Whipple OH

Are You Looking for a Writing Retreat?

If you are a serious writer who is looking for a place to retreat, renew, and rededicate yourself to your writing, you should consider spending a weekend with writer/teacher Linda Hasselstrom at her ranch home, Windbreak House, near Rapid City, South Dakota. Linda is the author of two memoirs (*Windbreak: A Woman Rancher on the Northern Plains* and *Going Over East: Reflections of a Woman Rancher*) two books of poetry, and an editor of *Leaning into the Wind*, a collection of stories by women of the High Plains. At Windbreak House, you will have your own private room, plus Linda's daily commentary and access to her library. About her retreat, Linda says, "I believe Windbreak House occupies a unique setting which will help other women write as it has helped me. In the place where all my work has been created, I'll evaluate your writing with the same meticulous attention I pay to my own, reviewing my suggestions with you. If you wish to exchange evaluations with other writers, I'll try to match participants whose working methods and styles are complementary." Linda also makes Windbreak House available for private residencies and to those who would like to teach their own workshop. The fee for the guided weekend retreat is \$212, which does not include travel or meals. For 1998 and 1999 dates, write to Windbreak House





Writing is a second chance at life...I think all writing constitutes an effort to establish our own meaningfulness, even in the midst of sadness and disappointment.—Jane Taylor McDonnell

All writing is in some way therapeutic...The crisis narrative obviously has its beginnings in the therapeutic impulse, in the desire to bear witness to some painful truth experienced either individually or collectively, in the wish to tell in order, finally, to heal...In all of this, the very act of writing is a part of recovery. In the telling, the writer becomes a survivor—one who has changed, but lived to tell the tale.—JTM

Cultivation of the voice—the power of speaking for oneself—is a prerequisite for maturity, because until we’ve found our own voices we can’t settle down to ask ourselves and others probing questions about life in the present.—Jean Ker Conway

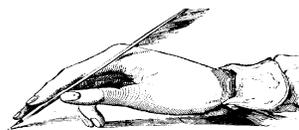
Books for the Journey

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 have a favorite book you’d like others to know about, write for our Reviewers Guide.

Living to Tell the Tale, by Jane Taylor McDonnell (Penguin, 1998, ISBN 0-14-026530-9, \$12.95).

If you’re writing your story, this little book (it’s only 161 pages, including the list of recommended readings) will be a wonderful companion. It is about writing ourselves through, and out of, crises in our lives—times of pain and anguish, times of loss. It is about using the memoir as a testimony to our survival. It is about strength, and finding it through our writing. It was written by a woman who has been teaching the memoir for sixteen years, in a college course called “Witness Narratives: Memoirs of Survival.” She is also the author of her own memoir, *News from the Border*, the story of her life with her autistic son—and of her own difficult experience of alcoholism.

The “crisis memoir,” as McDonnell calls it, has become an important form, enjoying great popularity among readers. She cites Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face*, Mary Karr’s *The Liar’s Club*. McDonnell argues that writing is therapeutic, and that if you have experienced trials and traumas, writing your own crisis story may be a way for you to begin to heal and understand. She deals with such important questions as “talking back” to our inner censors, learning to remember painful experiences, using our imaginations to explore the past, and finding an appropriate voice for the story we have to tell. Each chapter includes examples, discussion, and four or five helpful writing exercises. If you have a difficult story to tell and you’re finding it hard to get started on the work of writing, read this fine little book. It will show you that you aren’t alone in writing about the experience of pain—and that you can use your writing to help you survive.



When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography by Jill Ker Conway (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, ISBN 0-671-01745-4, \$23.00)

Jill Ker Conway, author of *The Road from Coorain* and *True North*, is one of our most widely-read and admired memoirists. Her books are praised for their graceful explorations of our most urgent questions of personal meaning: Where do I come from? What is my story? How has my past experience shaped me?

In *When Memory Speaks*, Conway turns her attention from her own life to the stories of other lives, looking at the modern memoir and the way it reflects our

culture and ourselves. She isn't writing exclusively about women, but this is a help, for she uses the narrative patterns of men's stories about their lives to show how women's memoirs evolved, comparing and contrasting the forms. Using examples from the autobiographies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin, David Livingston, Conway shows that men's stories typically involve the self-made hero who creates his life in conflict with social or natural forces. In men's memoirs, she says, the male hero reveals himself as *acting upon* the world in order to give it the shape and meaning he chooses.

Conway argues that until very recently, women's memoirs have shown quite a different pattern. They reveal the autobiographer as a "romantic heroine" who is *acted upon*, who seems to believe that she lacks control over her destiny and tends to censure her shaping role in her own story in order to satisfy her readers' expectations. Conway shows, for instance, that Jane Addams developed the Hull House project after several active and energetic years of careful study of European social reform—and yet she writes about her idea in the passive voice, as if she were its agent, rather than its creator. In this way, Conway says, "Addams is able to conceal her own role in making the events of her life happen and to conform herself to the romantic image of the female...shaped by circumstances beyond her control" (p. 49). And, Conway points out, even such assertive feminists as Germain Greer (in *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You*) and Gloria Steinem (*Revolution From Within*) reveal in their memoirs the difficulty of redefining ourselves as heroes of our own stories.

Conway's book is valuable for its deep and thoughtful discussion of the history of women's stories, compared to and contrasted with the autobiographical stories of men. But it is also valuable for what it has to say about the memoir itself, as a way to help us understand ourselves and our past experiences. If we recall the past as a chaos of random bits of good and bad luck that shaped us willy-nilly, we are likely to be victims of a similar future. If we see the past as the product of our choices and actions, we are better able to shape our futures:

We travel through life guided by an inner life plot—part the creation of family, part the internalization of broader social norms, part the function of our imaginations and our own capacity for insight into ourselves, part from our groping to understand the universe in which the planet we inhabit is a speck. When we speak about our memories, we do so through literary forms that seem to capture universals in human experience—the quest, the romance, the odyssey, the tragic or the comic mode. Yet we are all unique, and so are our stories. We should pay close attention to our stories. Polish their imagery. Find their positive rather than their negative form. Search for the ways we experience life differently from the inherited version and edit the plot accordingly....

As women memoirists, committed to understanding our stories and getting them straight, we need Conway's book. I hope you will read it, not just once but several times. It will help you to see which pattern your own story fits into: that of the woman who actively shapes her plot and chooses her response to the world, or that of the woman who waits to see what sort of plots life is going to dish out to her.—*Susan Wittig Albert*

What makes the reading of autobiography so appealing is the chance it offers to see how this man or that woman whose public self interests us has negotiated the problem of self-awareness and has broken the internalized code a culture supplies about how life should be experienced. Most of us...don't give our inner life scripts a fraction of the attention we give to the plots of movies or TV specials about some person of prominence. Yet the need to examine our inherited scripts is just beneath the surface of consciousness, so that while we think we are reading a gripping story, what really grips us is the inner reflection on our own lives the autobiographer sets in motion.—JKC

We all practice the craft of autobiography in our inner conversations with ourselves about the meaning of our experience...But few of us give close attention to the [metaphors] of the culture through which we report ourselves to ourselves...Take the romance, for example. The romantic heroine is someone acted upon, someone who responds to others, someone who is not the agent of her own destiny. Yet in reality we all make choices and manipulate others, though it is not part of the romantic life plot for the heroine to acknowledge what she's done.—JKC

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.

Not all writing groups are intentionally designed as Story Circles, but many meet the definition: women who come together to write their lives and share their stories with other women. Here is a moving description of a group that has been meeting in British Columbia. The organizer is Alanna Miller, a new member of the Network. Thank you, Alanna, for sharing the story of your work!

Two years ago, as part of a Self-Directed Masters in Adult Education, I began to research Women & Journal Writing, and as part of this process I realized I wanted to be part of a group of women who were interested in using journal writing as a means of personal growth. I invited women friends who I felt might be interested to join me in this journey. In May, 1996, six other women & myself (as facilitator) embarked on a seven-week program (three hours a week), where each week we tried a different journal writing technique, talked, and wrote together. The experience offered even more than any of us imagined. And although the form has changed slightly and the group has gone through various members, we have continued to meet—now twice monthly. We have just moved to more of a shared leadership model, which is another wonderful discovery on our journey....Five of us went on a Journal Weekend Retreat...and it was a magnificent weekend of taking wonderful care of ourselves, crying, laughing, sharing, walking the beach, sharing meals, and writing. As a gift to each other, we each shared a special piece of writing which will help maintain the memory for a lifetime....I have shared my experiences and my learning with classes and even a short workshop held at the college where I teach. The responses continue to be very encouraging and I love to see another woman inspired to use journals and writing as a means of telling her story and understanding herself.

Story Circle Facilitator Linda Watkins, of Georgetown TX, writes that she's taken on a new responsibility:

I am the program director for a Senior University for Georgetown. It started three weeks ago with 242 participants. We offer classes and lectures on Monday mornings.

A Senior University would be a wonderful setting for Story Circle Work. We'll stay in touch, Linda—maybe we can collaborate on a project!

*Linda Wisniewski, in Doylestown PA, has created a new Story Circle there and writes to request sample copies of the newsletter and information about group discounts for Susan Albert's book, **Writing From Life: Telling Your Soul's Story**. She writes:*

"We have started a Story Circle in our church, and have met five times already. There are ten of us...My massage therapist would like me to facilitate a Story Circle at her office, for another ten women... We enjoy writing our stories and are grateful to you for putting out such wonderful ideas."

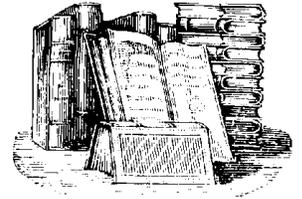
We've sent sample copies of the Journal to Linda to share with members of her group, and information about the book. Thanks for asking, Linda—and good luck with your group! We like your idea of linking up with your massage therapist to start a Circle. Many professionals have clients who would benefit from exploring their stories, and might welcome a Circle affiliated with their practice.



For an unusual Story Circle site, try this one, from Judy Yates, who lives in the Louisville KY area! Obviously, the Last Dollar Story Circle already has an intriguing story to tell. Keep us posted on your group's doings, Judy. (We wouldn't mind hearing fish stories, too.)

The "Last Dollar" Story Circle met for the first time on February 25, 1998. You may be asking yourself why the "Last Dollar." I can almost bet that this is the only Story Circle in the network that meets on a houseboat. Five years ago my husband and I sold the house where we had raised our three boys and moved full time year round to our boat. When we were able to find a 30-year-old 48x16' stell Puckebaum (a very good boat made right here in Prospect, KY) we used our last dollar and a 20-year dream came true. There were four of us at the last meeting and I have heard from three more who are interested. If you receive inquiries from others in the Louisville area, they may contact me at 502-966-3821 (day) or 502-228-2735 (evening). My address is Judy Yates, P.O. Box 124, Harrods Creek KY 40027.

Reading Women's Lives: A Reading Circle You Can Create



At Story Circle Network, we believe that the most important thing we can do for each other is to share our women's stories. Since the beginning of the Network, we have been encouraging our subscribers to create Story Circles, groups of women who come together to write about their lives and share their writing with others. Now, we want to encourage you to create **Reading Circles**, where women join in reading and discussing the published work of women writers.

What is a Reading Circle? Here's the way our Circle works in Austin TX. We meet for two hours on the first Wednesday of the month. (We meet at mid-day; we are planning a second circle for evening readers.) Participants may join at any time; their subscription fee for a six-month series is \$60. The facilitator chooses the books, all of which are paperbacks and readily available. She mails out reminders and prepares a set of study questions which she mails about two weeks before each discussion session. We meet in a home and enjoy a brown bag lunch while we talk. Here is a list of the books we have read or are reading over the next few months:

A Country Year: Living the Questions, Sue Hubbell
An Unknown Woman, by Alice Koller
Waist-High in the World, Nancy Mairs
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou
A House by the Sea, May Sarton
Prairie Reunion, by Barbara Scot
The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros
Gal, by Ruthie Bolton
A Match to the Heart, by Gretel Ehrlich

If you would like to create your own Reading Circle, we would be glad to share our study questions with you. So far, we have questions. (Send a #10 SASE to Story Circle, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605, and ask for the Reading Circle questions.) ***The Reading Book Handbook***, by Rachel Jacobsohn, is a very helpful guide to creating your own reading group. Jacobsohn's book is subtitled "Everything You Need to Know, From Choosing Members to Leading Discussions"—it will help you get started. Please do, and let us know how it works for you! We'd love to feature your Circle in a future issue of the *Journal*!



Looking for Back Issues of the Story Circle Journal?

You've found them!

You can purchase these back issues for \$5.00 each postpaid. Each issue contains ideas for Story Circle activities, as well as Susan Albert's suggestions for writing another chapter in your life story, book reviews, writing ideas, true words from real women. Bring your collection up to date while these are still available! To order, check off the issue you want and mail with your check to Story Circle Network, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605.

- Vol. 1 No. 1, Passionate Attachments: A History of the Heart
- Vol. 1 No. 2, A Closet of Memories
- Vol. 1 No. 3, Telling the Soul's Story: Our Spiritual Journeys
- Vol. 1 No. 4, Gardens of the Imagination: Growing a Life
- Vol 2 No. 1, Out of the Fire: From Devastation to New Growth

Our Readers Share Their



Stories....

Leanne Pitts sent this letter: "I am so excited to be writing you; my godmother sent me the *Journal* (Vol. 2 No. 1) and asked if I'd like a subscription and I'm writing you first before I say yes, I'm so excited. I wept after reading a few pages, as I have been attempting to write my memoirs here in prison for the last few years and have felt totally lost and alone. Bless you and bless my godmother....Please send me the writer's guidelines; I already have plenty of material I'd like to share and a poem waiting. What a magnificent circle of women...I was a librarian's aide in junior and high school and feel I'm back at home with such fine friends!"

Annie, we're so glad to have you with us! You're not the only one who's felt lost and alone in the effort to write her life story. Looking back, making sense of all the confusion and pain—it's hard work, but when we share, it gets easier, and that's what the Network is all about. We're looking forward to seeing your writing in our True Words from Real Women pages!

Gail A. Godio sends us this email through the guestbook on our website. "Writing has opened up issues in my life that I have pushed down deeply. Story Circle makes me even more proud to be

a woman, and to open myself to other women. I truly need all that writing has shown me about myself, and others. I do miss having an organized Story Circle group to attend [Gail was part of Grace Butland's group last year.] Hope to be able to start one. Thank you all at the Newsletter for the great ideas and input with each issue...Would enjoy hearing from others over the web site. Thank you all for everything you offer."

Gail, we were very moved by your message—hope you are able to create a Story Circle! We also like your idea of communicating through the web site. Wouldn't it be great to have a Story Circle chat room? Not this year, probably, because we are pretty busy with classes and groups here in Austin. But perhaps in 1998, we can get one started. Unless one of our readers just happens to be a Web Witch and would like to volunteer to create a chat room for us. (Hint hint!)

We also heard from **Cathy Manus-Gray**, from Cuyahoga Falls OH, via the guestbook. "I find the concept of Story Circles to be fascinating. Thank you for providing this web site to share with others (like me) who are unfamiliar with circles."

Linda Wisniewski, of Doylestown PA,

tells us about herself. (You can also read a note from Linda on the Story Circle Roundup page). "I am a former librarian, now working from home as an independent researcher, writer, and book reviewer. I have two sons, ages eight and 21, plus a dog, cat, and husband! I understand the need for women to be heard—if we don't tell our stories, we become invisible!"

Yes, yes, yes! Thanks, Linda. Many of us envy your at-home work as writer-reviewer-researcher. If you're interested in writing some articles about Story Circle, we'd be glad to provide all the information!

Heather Young, of Dallas Texas, sent us a note about herself for the Pen Partners column. She adds: "Thank you for creating the Story Circle Network, and *The Story Circle Journal* in particular. If there is ever a Story Circle formed that is anywhere close to where I live, I would love to be a part of it."

Are there any readers in Dallas who would like to join Heather to create a Circle?

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.

Join the Story Circle Network!

One year, USA \$20; Canada & Mexico, \$26; Elsewhere, \$30

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ - _____

I prefer to pay: _____ by check or money order
 _____ by Visa _____ or Mastercard _____
 Card # _____
 Expiration date _____
 Signature of cardholder _____

Foreign memberships: MC/Visa or International Postal Money Order only

Mail to Story Circle Network, P.O. Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605