

Story Circle Journal

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

Volume 2 Number 4

Memoir Project Funded!

As you can see from the first issue of the OWL-Circle newsletter that we've included at the back of this issue of the Story Circle Journal, we have received funding for our Older Women's Legacy Circle project! The exciting news came in late August, and we've been working hard since then so that the workshops funded by the grant can get underway in early February.

The project is a good example, we think, of what determined women can do when they work together as a team to accomplish important goals. The idea of applying for the grant was suggested by Hannah O'Donoghue, one of our board members, who knew about the funding opportunities being offered by the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word. We decided to propose the idea of working with senior women because of the clear and pressing need in that area, and we suggested memoir workshops because that's where our interest and experience lies. Susan Albert wrote the proposal with the help of Mary Jane Marks, who is an active volunteer in many senior organizations. Other members of the board critiqued it, and we sent it off. Of course, we didn't dare allow ourselves to get too excited about the possibility that the proposal would be funded because we didn't want to be disappointed. So it was a joyful moment when the check arrived and we could celebrate the launch of our new project. We'll be telling you more about OWL-Circle's activities as we go along, through the *Journal*, the OWL-Circle newsletter, and the website. If you'd like to be more closely involved, you might want to become an OWL-Circle Associate. You'll find details about this and more in our special insert (pp 16-18)

Exciting as the OWL-Circle project is, it isn't the only thing that's going on these days at the Story Circle Network. We have a new office, located in the AGE Building, 3710 Cedar St, in Austin TX. It's a small space, but it gives us a place to work, to hold meetings, and to maintain our answering machine. Since we're still a new organization, we don't have a staff. All of the Network's staff work is done by volunteers, and the office will help to give us a stronger identity. (If we're a little late answering your inquiries, please remember that we *are* volunteers, and sometimes we get snowed under!)

As we told you in our last newsletter, we have also been working on a plan to launch the first Story Circle chapter. In January, we will be inviting Austin-area members of the national Network organization to a Sunday afternoon get-acquainted tea. We plan to follow this event up with an Austin-Circle Chapter

Quite often people come up to me and say, "Let me tell you about my family. Wouldn't you love to write about it?" I say, "No, that's your story, and you have to write it. If you don't recount your family history, it will be lost." Honor your own stories and tell them, too. The tales may not seem very important, but they are what binds families and makes each of us who we are—Madeleine L'Engle

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activity sometime in March (Women's Month). If there is enough local interest—and we believe there will be—some exciting chapter programming can get underway immediately.

In addition to all of these happenings, the board of directors has carried on its usual activities, more or less calmly. We have just elected six new members to our board (more about these wonderful women in the February newsletter) and have begun working with a consultant who is helping us to learn more about the challenges involved in creating a national organization. We're having fun—and we're very glad that you're a part of it too!

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 report on the activities 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)

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 yourself 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.

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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!

Starting cold? Warm up first!

Have you ever tried to start a cold car in the middle of December? You hit the ignition, you give it extra gas—and nothing happens! Sometimes getting started on a piece of writing is just as hard as starting a cold engine. No matter how much we might want to get going, sometimes we just can't find the spark, or we can't seem to turn on the fuel. What we need is an extra charge for the battery, a little push, a boost. What we need is something to get us started, to warm us up!

Here are some warm-up exercises that will not only get the ink flowing, but will also give you plenty of ideas to write about later. You might try doing each of these warm-ups on a clean page of your notebook, so that you can come back at another time and expand what you've written. (We've given you some ideas for ways that you can use the material you develop here.)

1. Make a list of the ten most important things that have ever happened to you. Later, write a page about each one. What happened? Who was involved? Why did it happen? Why was it important to you? What were the consequences?

2. Write down the three most important lessons you have ever learned. Later, write about what you did with the knowledge. Why were these lessons valuable to you?

3. In chronological order, jot down all the houses you've ever lived in. Later, choose the 3 most important and describe them. What made them important?

4. Write down the names of the people you have loved longest and most dearly. Later, choose 3 to write

about. Why did you love these people? What did they add to your life?

5. Describe the three most important choices you've ever made. Later, write about what happened after you made each of these choices. What did they lead to?

6. Write about the three most significant jobs (include volunteer work) you ever had. Later, choose one job and write about it. Be sure to tell how you grew from the experience. How did the work enrich your life?

7. List the three most memorable events in your life. Later, choose one and write down everything you can remember about it.

8. What is the funniest thing that ever happened to you? Later, see if you can remember two or three other funny things.

9. List four things you would do differently if you had a choice. Later, write in detail about one of these. Why would you choose differently? What choice would you make instead? What difference do you think it would have made in your life?

10. Write down five things that please and delight you the most. Later, choose one and do it. Write about the enjoyment and pleasure you feel.)

OTHER WARM-UPS YOU CAN TRY!

Write about the groups you belong to.

Make a list of your hobbies. Which is your favorite?

Describe your three most comfortable outfits. What does each reveal about you?

Do you have any hand-me-down recipes? Collect them into a little booklet, with a paragraph telling who gave you the recipe and when. (Read "Soul Foods") What do you like about this recipe?

Choose a piece of furniture that you have loved. What does it look like? Where did it come from? Who did it belong to? Why do you love it?

Pick three favorite books. Why is each one important to you? What did you learn from each? What do these choices reveal about you?

The Journaling Page

a guest column by **lisa shumicky**

If you're writing a memoir, you know that you'll be drawing on memory for the details that will make your story come alive. What better place to capture those day-to-day memories than in your journal? Contributing editor lisa shumicky gives us some ideas for noting down those beautiful (and sometimes not-so-lovely) holiday moments before they fade into the oblivion of a forgotten past.

Writing the Holidays

*Susan invited me to consider this topic, and I invite you to do it...
Write the holidays.*

For starters—maybe on the first page of your notebook—write an invitation to yourself as a statement of your intention to record the traditionally hectic holiday season. Include:
Occasion: Holiday Season, 1998 (for example)
Date: From Thanksgiving to New Year's Day
Time: Every night (a half-hour of your choice)
Raindate: Rain, or snow, or shine
RSVP: To this volume.
Hostess: Me
Guest of Honor: Me!

Treat yourself to some new pens that are the colors of the season: orange, brown, gold, maroon, red & green, silver & blue.

*Simple Abundance's practice of simply listing five things that you grateful for works well as a theme for November, to givesome quick focus to your writing.
In December, I often play with the idea of gifts given & gifts received—& I don't mean the tangibles.*

*Draw the seating plan of your Thanksgiving dinner table.
Include a recipe and a memory related to it.
What is your recipe for a perfect Thanksgiving?
When I was in high school and college,
I would take a walk on the beach in the morning—mostly to get out of my mother's (the madwoman in the kitchen) way. I still like getting out into the fresh air of Thanksgiving morning and countingmy blessings, though now we're more likelyto build up an appetite by raking leaves around our yard.*

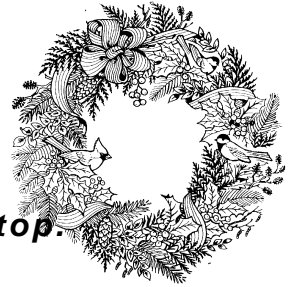
Do you write an annual Christmas letter?

**Include it in your journal—write the first draft there.
Remember to save one of your
Christmas cards and glue it into the notebook...**

**Write a letter to Santa.
What do you really want for Christmas?
Are you willing to receive it?**

If the holidays get you down, write it out.

**Take your notebook shopping with you.
Find a quiet spot in the midst of it all.
Buy yourself a cup of hot chocolate and sit, just stop.
Relax.**



**List what you've already accomplished.
Keep yourself organized by writing a second list—
of things you need to do.**

**Look inside yourself by writing a third list—
of things you want to think about,
dreams you want to dream.**

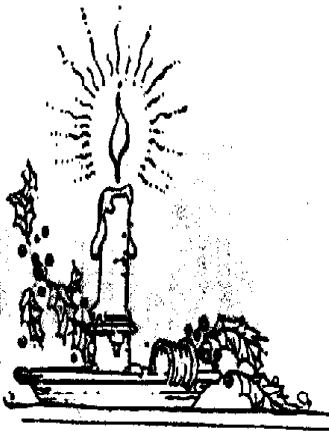
**Listen to the music piped through the store and
reflect on the deeper meanings of what you've written.**

**Include a sample of your
wrapping paper in your journal.**

At the New Year, look backward, look forward.

**What have you done?
What do you still want to do?
Make a list of 100 wonderful things.**

**Hopefully, one of them is this:
"I wrote a lot during this holiday season
and I'm so glad I did!"**



Soul Food: Foods, Kitchens & Cooks We Have Loved


by Susan Wittig Albert

Each issue, 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 her book **Writing From Life: Telling Your Soul's Story**, offering ideas and topics for your writing. 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.

There are strong women who can be moved to tears by the burnished purple beauty of an eggplant, the subtle upward arc of a banana, as promising as a new moon or a smile. There are plain-living women who believe that there is poetry in mashed potatoes, yet would sooner eat their old-fashioned argyles than a forkful of arugula. There are iron-willed women who revel in secret fantasies about that proverbial pie in the sky, the kind that exerts no gravitational pull on the hips. There are sunny-side-up women who make tequila sunrises when life gives them lemons. There are down-to-earth women who never forget to count their blessings—or to ask for second helpings. Tastes vary; what is universal is the primal pleasure we take in feeding our faces—and in the process, our souls.—Autumn Stephens



Soul Foods

 It's the time of year when women's thoughts turn to food—food for the holidays, warm food for a chill night, fun food to stave off the winter blahs. It's also a time when we think back to past family celebrations, when our mothers and grandmothers and aunts joined hands in the kitchen to produce the wonderful food whose memory nurtured us through the 365 days until the *next* celebration. For most of us, food has played an important role in our lives, and our memories of individual dishes, special eating occasions, particular kitchens, and nurturing cooks continue to warm our souls.

To start your chapter on foods, try making a quick list of the most memorable foods you can recall. Settle down with a pen and paper (or computer), and give yourself 3 minutes to list the names of dishes that you remember with some special feeling (maybe not always a *good* feeling!). Some examples: Aunt Jane's pumpkin pie, Tom's barbecued ribs, oysters at the Oyster Shack (ugh), Grandma's chicken and dumplings. When the time's up and your list is completed, choose one or two of your entries and write a story about them. Here are some questions you might consider:

- What was the food? What did it taste like? What was it made of?
- Who cooked the food? Who shared it with you? What was the occasion?
- What makes this food memorable?

You can repeat this exercise as often as you like. Of course, if you add the recipes for your favorite dishes, you'll end up with a cook book—an idea that your family will probably applaud.) For a wonderful example of this kind of writing, read "I always think of my grandmother on Sunday afternoons," on p. 11.)

If you have moved often, lived in different regions of the country, or spent time abroad, perhaps these different experiences have affected your taste in foods. You could write a whole section of your chapter about this topic, using the following questions as a guide:

- What kind of food do you remember as a child? (Read "Sitting in the Swing," on p. 10) What style of cooking did your family most enjoy? Did you eat out often, or mostly eat at home? What did your family's food choices reveal about your social class or ethnic connections? What

did you like most about these choices? What did you like least?

- As an adult, what different regions of the country have you lived in? Which regional foods did you like most? Which did you like least? What interesting or funny stories can you tell about regional foods?
- What countries have you visited? How have your travels affected your culinary tastes?
- Now that you are older, do you prefer to eat at home or eat out? What kind of restaurants do you choose? If there have been changes in your food/dining preferences, do they reflect your changed life style?
- How much of the family's food did your mother prepare? How much do you prepare? How do you feel about this?

During our lifetimes, the American diet has undergone a tremendous change, and not just in terms of the wider variety of foods that are available to us. Many of us have also become much more aware of the health values of our diet. We may become concerned about too much fat, too little fiber, too much sugar and salt, and so on. Sometimes we make major changes in diet as a result of a shift of personal philosophy or spiritual/religious inclination—from a meat-based to a vegetarian diet, for instance. Here are some questions that can help you write about this dimension of your diet:

- Have you ever made significant changes in your diet for health reasons? for religious/spiritual reasons? for philosophical reasons?
- What's the story behind your decision?
- What kind of changes did you make? How long were you able to maintain them? How did you feel about these changes at the time? How do you feel now?
- Have you ever developed an addiction to a food that wasn't good for you? What's the story behind this craving? How have you dealt with it?

Sometimes our diets and food preferences change so gradually that it's hard to see the differences. But our food is an important part of our story—it's helpful to understand just how it has influenced other parts of our lives.

Kitchens & So Forth

My favorite kitchens are rural. My grandmother's farm kitchen was home to a just-born baby goat behind the wood stove, and there was fresh cow's milk and hot biscuits and gravy for breakfast. My mother's kitchen was fragrant with grape jelly and tart-spicy with dill pickles. My own present kitchen looks out over acres of meadow, brown with autumn grasses blowing in the wind.

But these three generations of kitchens are very different, for American kitchens have changed every bit as much as American food habits. To get a sense of the significance of these changes in your own life, reflect for a few moments on these questions:

- What was your grandmother's kitchen like? Was it large or small? What appliances did she own? What kind of kitchen chores do you recall her doing? How much time did she spend in the kitchen every day? What dishes and utensils do you remember? What feelings do you recall from that

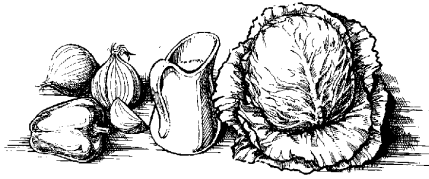
*Research tells us that fourteen out of any ten individuals like chocolate.—
Sandra Boynton*

Never eat more than you can lift—Miss Piggy

Marie Callendar started her career in her kitchen during World War II, selling home-made pies to a local deli. In 1986, when she sold her business to Ramada Inn, Marie Callender's Restaurants & Bakeries was grossing nearly \$200 million dollars a year.

*My grandmother's kitchen was a place of unceasing activity: of planting and plucking, of pickling and freezing, of jam boiling down on the stove while a cheesecloth bag full of curds hung from the kitchen faucet to drain. From underneath the wood stove, a scratchy, scruffling sound was our clue that chicks or goslings were hatching. Over all of this my father's mother presided, Keeper of the Keys without parallel...What did my grandmother draw upon to work the way she did? Everybody worked hard then, terribly hard; but that doesn't account for the restrained merriment we glimpsed in the way she went about things, or for the extras. I could say, "Oh, well, it was love." But that doesn't quite get it, either. We all "love," after all. I think there was more, and naming it comes as something of a shock in our supposedly liberated world: my grandmother knew her worth. She knew the value of everything she did in the house and around it—knew that it was endlessly significant.—
Laurel Robertson*

Roast beef, medium, is not only a food. It is a philosophy.—Edna Ferber



Grandpa's Mashed Potatoes

Until the day he died, Grandpa Franklin wouldn't eat mashed potatoes without garlic—and anybody who didn't like the taste had to go without. This is how Grandma fixed them for him.

*6 potatoes, peeled
8 whole garlic cloves, peeled
1 1/4 cup milk
3 tablespoons butter
1/3 cup minced fresh parsley
salt and pepper*

Simmer potatoes and garlic together in enough water to cover, until potatoes are tender. Drain, return to pot, and mash potatoes and garlic together. Add the milk and butter, parsley, salt and pepper, and mash some more. Serves 4 garlic fanciers.—Susan Albert



It always seems to me that cooking is like love. You don't have to be particularly beautiful or very glamorous, or even very exciting to fall in love. You just have to be interested in it. It's the same with food. You do not have to be a genius. You don't have to come from a long culinary tradition....You know, the first sentence of Dr. Spock's immortal classic, Baby and Child Care, is "Trust yourself." You just have to relax. I assure you that if you keep it simple, everything will turn out just fine.—Laurie Colwin

kitchen?

- When you were 12 or 14, what was your mother's kitchen like? What appliances did she own? What were her kitchen chores? How much time did she spend in the kitchen every day? What feelings do you recall from that kitchen? What memories?
- Describe your first kitchen. What appliances did you own? What kitchen chores did you do? How much time did you spend on them? What feelings/memories do you recall? Can you tell a funny story about your first kitchen?
- Describe your most recent kitchen. What appliances do you own? What kitchen chores do you do? How much time do you spend on them? What feelings do you have about this kitchen? Do you own any special dish or utensil that belonged to another generation? (See "The Blue Cake Stand," p. 10.)

Changing kitchen technologies have a lot to do with our changing life styles, don't you think? I know some busy women whose kitchens are an extension of the local grocery, stocked with processed/prepared/frozen foods. I know other women who choose to "start from scratch." If this is an issue for you, you might want to write about it. These choices also have to do with our feeling about "women's work"—the traditional domestic chores (cooking included) that keep the household running. But men are beginning to pitch in. Here are some questions for you to consider:

- Did your grandfather help out in your grandmother's kitchen? Why/why not?
- Did your father cook or do any chores in your mother's kitchen? Why/why not? How did your mother feel about this? How did he feel about it?
- Does your partner/spouse help in the kitchen? What chore does he do? How does he feel about it? How do you feel about it?
- Do/did your children help out in the kitchen? Do/did they enjoy "food play"? (See "The Fulfillment," on p. 10.)

Cooks (Including You!)

Every one of us remembers a particular cook. My own favorite recollection centers on my friend Emily, who had (at the time I met her), 10-year-old twins, a frenetic career as a bank officer, and an equally busy husband. Emily also loved to cook, and despite the dizzying demands of her life, was known to dash home from work and whip up Swedish meat balls, mashed potatoes, vegetables au gratin, and a birthday cake. When I first became aware of this odd quirk in her personality, I assumed that she had to be a nut—or a Martha Stewart understudy. But over the years, Emily has become one of my heroes. She believes in good food and what it does for her family, and she's interested in learning all she can about cooking. She is teaching her daughters to cook, and she is seriously thinking about writing a cookbook. I have to admit that this dedication to the art of food is not exactly my cup of tea, but I *love* to visit her house and help taste-test her latest creation.

Do you know a cook you would like to write about? Is there a cook in your family who deserves to have her story told, or her favorite recipes collected and shared? How about an aunt? A friend? Yourself? And speaking of yourself, it might be interesting for you to write about the history of your experiences as a

cook. Looking back over the years, think about these questions, and see what you can come up with.

- What was the first thing you ever cooked? What was the occasion? Who showed you how? How did your dish turn out?
- Do you remember your first pie? Your first cake? Your first loaf of bread?
- Can you tell any funny or embarrassing stories on yourself as a cook? What funny stories might your family tell?
- Do you remember the first time you cooked an entire Thanksgiving dinner all by yourself? What happened? How did it turn out? (Tell the truth, now!)
- Is there a food tradition in your family? Do you follow it? Why/why not?
- You may not be Julia Childs, but perhaps you have developed a particular cooking passion or food speciality. What do you cook well? How did you learn to do this? What's the story behind your interest?
- Some people enjoy collecting cookbooks. Do you? If you have a cookbook collection, write about it. Which ones are your favorites? Who is your favorite food writer Why? Would *you* like to write a cookbook?

We cannot live without food, but we often fail to appreciate the role food plays in our lives. I remember once, on retreat, being urged to do a regular “food meditation”: eating slowly and in silence, thoughtfully observing the taste and the smell and the texture of the food, being grateful to the cook, being mindful of the everyday ritual of eating. I would like to say that this simple exercise changed my eating behavior, that I no longer eat without paying attention to the food and to the act of eating—but that wouldn't be true. Still, though, I am often reminded of this meditation, and when I think of it, I slow down, eat with conscious awareness, and then go write in my journal. It's a good thing to do. You might want to try it sometime.

In the meantime, have dessert.



Women Writers at the Kitchen Table

Laura Esquivel: *Like Water for Chocolate*

Banana Yoshimoto: *Kitchen*

Fannie Flagg: *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*

Jeannette Winterson: *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

Diane Mott Davidson: *The Main Corpse*

Susan Wittig Albert: *Chile Death*

With a circle of fresh dough on my pastry board, I prepared to roll rugelach...from my grandmother's recipe. I smoothed some flour down the length of my wooden rolling pin, sprinkled a little on the board, and rubbed some into my hands. My hands, and all the hands that bake with mine. Three smacks to the top of the cold dough with my pin to soften it, and suddenly they appeared, as if summoned magically from the past. There they were, seated around my mother's big dining room table set for a holiday...It was all so familiar—Grandma Selma's glittering diamond bracelet and red fingernails waving, and Papa Eddy with a fat cigar and a handful of aces. Papa Max telling stories and Grandma Rae sitting up tall in her corset, Great-Grandmas Esther Hanna and Reba and Bella trading recipes and tenement gossip... And all the voices repeated the words that Grandma Rae used to say: If we live long enough, we always come full circle.—

Nancy Ring



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, 1999—The Path of the Artist: Creativity in our Lives (deadline Jan. 15, 1999)

May, 1999—Mother, Mother (deadline April 15, 1999)

August, 1999—Sisters & Sisterhood (deadline July 15, 1999)



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 ballpoint pen (or your typewriter or computer) and send in your submissions. We want to hear from you!

The Fulfillment

When I was a child, I played in dirt using nuts, leaves, sticks, and small stones to prepare muddled delicacies. Whipped cream of Queen Anne's Lace and flower seeds were toppings for those fancy mud pies. Molding clay was formed into make-believe tables and chairs for my miniature dolls. I served my guests on oak leaves and walnut shells. It was a grand feast in the world of a child's imagination.

Today, I love cooking, stirring, and creating fragrant new dishes. I love making pie shells, breads, and yeast rolls; rolling, crimping fragile edges; shaping and forming the dough. Working with my hands and rolling pin, I allow my imagination to rewrite recipes. I dance in delicious anticipation as those trial recipes are prepared, and today, when I serve my guests my creations on fine china and lace, I am a woman fulfilled.

Today, when I observe a child steeped in imaginary play in a clay and dirt world, I see potential...waiting to be fulfilled.

Marcy Wooldridge

Sitting in the Swing Under the Cedar Tree

You know those great big biscuits you get at those fast food fried chicken places? You put a big hunk of butter on them and umm aren't they great? Well believe me, they don't even begin to compare with the great big fluffy ones my Gramma used to make when I was a little girl living with her on a farm in the Piney woods of Texas. Those biscuits were so big and so fluffy they just seemed to fly right off my plate and into my mouth.

Even better were those same biscuits, left over from breakfast, around 4 in the afternoon, about the time I was getting home from school. I would rush into the kitchen, starving to death, I thought, and grab one of those cold biscuits from a platter in the middle of the red-checked oilcloth-covered kitchen table. I'd poke my index finger into the side of that cold biscuit, making a nice deep hole almost through to the other side. And then I'd pour that hole full of molasses and take a real big bite. Of course, that old molasses would run down both sides of my mouth and sometimes make a mess all over the floor, so I'd walk out back to sit in the swing under the cedar tree and finish my snack before I had to begin my after-school chores. Talk about food for the soul—nothing today can compare to eating a big cold biscuit poured full of molasses, sitting in a swing under a cedar tree in Gramma's back yard, day dreaming.

"Come on, now, child, you've got to get to those chores. I can't wait all day!" Gramma would call out to me and tap on the window pane with a silver thimble she kept there for just that

purpose, to get my attention. I'd have to put my dreams away for another day and get busy. Boy, was it great while it lasted!

Bobbie Mahoney
Tustin CA

The Blue Cake Stand

The blue cake stand rests securely in my china closet. Beside it is one with a cover, another with embossed roses, and a gold tray with peeling finish which revolves and plays *Happy Birthday*. But the blue one with the hobnail base and fluted edges has held my birthday cakes since I was a baby. All the pictures with me in my white June sundresses, candles in ascending number, have as the centerpiece a white angel food cake, fluffy frosting, sometimes flowers, all perched on the blue cake stand.

It was not my mother's as she was not a lover of culinary arts. She was a musician and expressed herself in other arts. It belonged to Mrs. Cather, the personification of wonderful cooking, gardens filled with daisies and zinnias, and biscuits, jellies, and fresh baked bread. She cooked and cooked and cooked, and people trooped down the path to her log cabin kitchen and took home dinners, parties, or a birthday cake. I suppose half the people my mother knew had birthday cakes perched on "my" cake stand. Looking back, I suppose they thought of it as theirs too, but that never occurred to me. To me, it was mine as surely as if I had purchased it myself when I was two years old.

Through the years it has borne joy, love, expectancy, and stability when other things were spinning too fast. The year my husband was in California and I alone with a baby, 200 miles from home. After a quick, tearful call and a four-hour drive, a white cake welcomed me from its blue base. All was suddenly right with my world. Another year, without a husband, the blue glass emblem provided solace for a newly dissolved marriage.

Perhaps ten years ago, perhaps fifteen, the owner of my cake stand passed away, leaving an entire town with an emptiness we all shared. While visiting that summer, to the off-key singing of *Happy Birthday*, my mother presented me with an Italian creme cake, just one candle, on my blue glass cake stand. As I washed it later I saw on the bottom, written on masking tape, my name. Mrs. Cather had known for years she would give it to me. She had made certain of it. How did she know? Does she know what place of honor it has in my heart, and each June in my home? She must. She and I always knew it was mine.

Dulany D. Woodward
Buena Vista CO

I always think of my grandmother on Sunday afternoons

Our family spent Sundays at my grandparents' house in Edinburg, Mississippi, visiting with my grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. When we arrived, MaMaw was in the kitchen, cooking wonderful things for Sunday dinner. "Dinner," back then, referred to the large meal in the middle of the day. My mouth waters now, as I think of the roast beef with gravy, mashed potatoes, fresh butterbeans, creamed corn, string beans—oh, I could go on and on about the delicious fresh vegetables straight from their garden! But my favorite was MaMaw's biscuits, the lightest and most delicious I've ever eaten. The smell from the kitchen was heavenly. While she cooked she would be singing a hymn: *In the sweet bye 'n' bye, we shall meet on that beautiful shore*. Always either at the oven or kitchen sink, quietly singing and efficiently tending to her chores, she seemed so content and happy to see how everyone enjoyed her food and hospitality.

Dinner began with MaMaw saying the blessing: "Heavenly father, we humbly ask thy blessing on this table. May we always be truly thankful. Amen." Then she would hover over the table, making sure that everyone was served and all had large glasses of iced tea. Finally, she would sit, after everyone insisted she relax and eat her own dinner!

Dessert was usually served later in the afternoon with coffee, when friends and other family members stopped by for a visit. Summertime would bring fried pies made of fresh peaches or apples that would melt in your mouth, or home-made ice cream made in an old-fashioned crank ice cream bucket. My grandfather and uncles would take turns cranking the handle while the cream, eggs, and sugar turned into a luscious smooth

frozen treat. In the winter, we'd often have sweet potato pie, carrot cake, or oatmeal pecan cookies, their sweet spicy scent filling the house. Of course, everything was made from scratch.

Afterward, the men sometimes played horseshoes while the rest of us watched. I can still hear the clink of the shoe when it circled the stake and the low, gentle laughter of the women watching on the lawn. Sometimes Aunt Patty would sing, accompanied by Uncle Keith on guitar, her clear sweet voice floating in the quiet country evening. Then at dusk, it was time to pile into the car, tired and full of MaMaw's cooking, for the trip home.

MaMaw's Sweet Potato Pie

2 medium sweet potatoes
1 stick butter
3 eggs
1 cup sugar
1 can Eagle brand sweetened condensed milk
dash salt
flavoring as desired (I use 2 teaspoons nutmeg)

Peel, cube, and boil potatoes until done. Add butter, sugar and eggs and beat on medium speed of mixer until well blended. Add milk and salt and mix well. Pour into two unbaked pie shells and bake at 350° for about 45 minutes, or until firm.

Charlotte Hamrick
New Orleans LA

*Are you interested in publishing your memoir?
Do you want to tell someone else's life story?
Dayna Finet's new column will tell you how to break into print.
Turn to p. 15*



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
- ___ Vol. 2 No. 2, Minding Our Own Business: Writing about Work
- ___ Vol. 2 No. 3, Life with Father

Especially for LifeWriting Teachers....

My Grandmother's Beads

by Dianne Lodge-Peters

Dianne lives, writes, teaches workshops, and celebrates her keepsakes in Evergreen Alabama. Last month, we shared her article, "Icebreakers." This month, we're delighted to offer Dianne's suggestions for a workshop exercise

Among the keepsakes I've inherited from my grandmother is a long necklace of glowing glass beads—pale yellow, dawn blue, evening lavender, and new-growth green. A gold bezel rims each one on the chain, and delicate gold links and faux pearls separate one bead from the next. Although it's an antique, I doubt that my grandmother's necklace would fetch twenty dollars. But for writing my life stories, Nana's beads are priceless.

Bead memories are "moments of heightened perception," Marlene Schiwy tells us in *A Voice of Her Own*, "in which the realms of thinking and feeling, imagination and reason [are] fused." Bead memories can leap to life from an object—a postcard or souvenir brought home from a holiday, a keepsake once belonging to a family member, or a handprint in plaster received from a kindergartener. Among the memories on Nana's string of beads, for example, are springtime shoots of lilies of the valley, sometimes pushing through the snow under her bedroom window. I never smell those flowers—or the eau de cologne called *Emeraude*—without remembering the love my grandmother had for the green-growing plants in her house and garden.

Yet not all bead memories are as tangible as flowers held in a hand. Some are metaphoric, perhaps symbolic. They function as signs or signals of deeper meanings. Pale yellow beads on Nana's necklace remind me of the warmth I felt in her light and airy kitchen. Her warmth seemed to emanate from a huge copper-sheathed hot water heater which she polished every Thursday to a peachy sheen. To this day, coppery light fills me with a sense of security. I know who I am because Nana told me family stories while we worked in her kitchen together.

Still other bead memories are powerful stories about fear. Scary life-stories draw out visceral responses that are fused with imaginative, psychological, and intuitive responses as if all combined into one frightful terror riding the evening wind. When Nana died, for example, she sent me "the Sight," meaning that sometimes I "know" things before they happen, just as she did. Such clairvoyance seems to be inherited. In Nana's dying moments, her spirit crossed a thousand miles to be with me in the moonlight, telling me that my "Sight" would work after I heard the sound of colors—copper sparking, for instance—and that the baby I carried inside me was to have the



selfsame Sight. Today, the baby is forty years old and the father of two boys. Having the Sight is a fearsome thing for both of us, but we have many stories to tell about how following the "Sight" saved us from being hurt.

Teaching bead memories in a workshop setting seems to work best when participants recall those sensory details that a snapshot cannot capture—smells, tastes, and textures rather than size, color, and shape. These memories glow because the sensory details are unique to the person who sense them. The memory is her truth, her authenticity, and no one else's. I offer, then, this sequence of exercises for threading bead memories on a shining string.

Exercise 1. In two or three sentences identify a personal object or artifact which has special meaning for you. (To identify is to name and briefly describe an item and then give one reason for the importance you attach to it.)

Exercise 2. In a paragraph, describe that object or artifact more fully. Take its measure, focusing on its feel, taste, smell, sound.

Exercise 3. Draft a short-short story about the object.

- ❖ Where and/or whose was it before it came to you?
- ❖ Was the object important to that person or place? Why?
- ❖ How did that object come into your hands? Did someone else want it? Did you fight for it, or did it come to you by default?

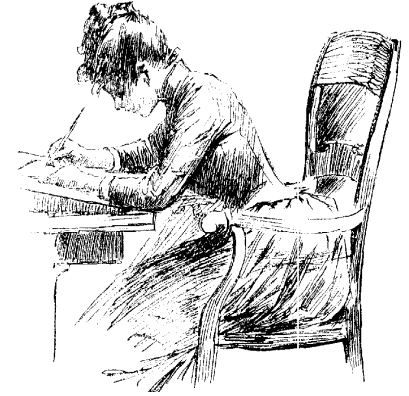
Exercise 4. What metaphoric or symbolic value(s) do you attach to the object? Does the item signify a quality you admire, like courage?—or detest, like vindictiveness? Why? Write your answers to these questions.

Exercise 5. Write a narrative in which you show the ways your life is different now from what your life was before you came to own the object.

Whether written in class or at home, these exercises have the capacity to astonish others when the words are shared aloud. A good bit of the surprise stems from insights gained in using sensory detail, like those I cherish from inheriting my grandmother's beads.

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.



***Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew*, by Ursula K. LeGuin** (Eighth Mountain Press, 1998).

Ursula LeGuin's ***Steering the Craft*** is a how-to book for story writers who work in groups or by themselves. Within its 173 pages, LeGuin presents exercises, topics to mull over or discuss, and examples from other story writers who've mastered the elements, techniques, and skills of narrative language. Narrative is LeGuin's focus, and narrative is story. Life stories, memoirs, autobiographical sketches are all narratives; they are all stories.

Especially helpful to memoirists, I think, is LeGuin's slant on the idea of story. She offers "counterweight opinions . . . to unhook people from the idea that they have to make an elaborate plan of a tight plot before they're allowed to write a story." She says:

- ❖ "Plot is a form of story which uses action as its mode, usually in the form of conflict . . . ending in a climax." (p. 145)
- ❖ "We don't have to have the rigid structure of a plot to tell a story." (p. 146)
- ❖ "Story is something moving, something happening, something or someone changing." (p. 146)
- ❖ "Narrative . . . should end up in a different place from where it started. That's what narrative does. It goes. It moves. Story is change." (p. xii)

I offer my own experience of LeGuin's book. I had two life stories that needed to come out—the first about an amethyst stickpin that caused my father's brother to hang himself, and the second about a Dear John letter that came in a box also containing a giant dead cockroach. In other words, I had the general contours of "story": how my uncle's suicide affected the family, and the change in my aunt who saved a little box with a bug in it for almost 50 years.

Given the contours, the storyline, the chronology of facts, I simply worked alone, writing out LeGuin's several exercises in one of those composition notebooks that lies flat, has a blotchy black and white cover, and costs less than a dollar. I needed to find the sensory details and images, the points of view and voice, the "stuff" that quickened the life in my own life stories. I emerged from the notebook with that stuff intact; I didn't emerge with a full first draft in hand, but writing it came easily. And as first drafts go, it wasn't half-bad. In less than a month, from slugging and slogging through those really hard exercises (Oh, how I loved them then, and still do) I learned to distinguish between, say, the memoirist's "I" and the "I" of a person who keeps a daily journal: one is a character, the other has character. And more. Under LeGuin's direction, I found the kind of sacredness that honors the craft of telling our life stories.—*Dianne Lodge-Peters, Evergreen AL*

Chapters or exercises carry ordinary titles (Punctuation, Verbs, Syntax, Voice) but the subtitles give away the secret: Be Gorgeous, Chastity, Changing Voices, A Terrible Thing to Do (but isn't it fun?) LeGuin's take on writing narrative is playful. From occasional "opinion pieces" to "critiquing tips," she delivers a delightful, insightful awareness of the craft—not for therapy, not for questing a spiritual path, and not just for self-expression, but for building the skills writers need to tell stories about their lives.

*Evaluating LeGuin's how-to book begins, I think, by stacking it against other how-to books by contemporary women writers for contemporary women. **Steering the Craft** is not so much for getting started. It's not like Natalie Goldberg's **Writing Down the Bones** or **Wild Mind**, both of which are very good at breaking through writing blocks or overcoming inertia. Nor is it exactly like Susan Woolldridge's **Poemcrazy** or Roberta Allen's **Fastfiction**, which achieve the same end—a beginning. But for the middle distance and finishing a storyline, LeGuin is nonpareil. She is a companion for the long haul; she will help you get a solid draft finished, on paper, where you can see what you've done and how you can make it better.*

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 free copies of The Story Circle Journal. Write to us for details.



Austin TX Story Circle members and friends, mark your calendars!

You will soon be receiving a formal invitation to a tea to be held on the afternoon of Sunday, January 10, at 3710 Cedar Street, in Austin. At the tea, we will share our stories, learn more about the various activities of the Story Circle Network, and discuss the exciting possibilities of our first local chapter, the Austin Circle Chapter. We hope you will come to the tea and bring your friends! The planning group in charge of this activity (chaired by Ramona Toines and Mary Jane Marks) is also thinking ahead to programs in the months of February and March. (March is National Women's Month, of course—what better time to celebrate our stories?)

Speaking of Women's Month, we would like to hear about the activities your Story Circle is planning during March. If you are hosting a story-writing or story-telling workshop, class, or reading group, please let us know about it, and we will feature it in our February newsletter.



Last month we told *y o u a b o u t* **"Conversations,"** a project that is the brain-child of **Mary Jane Marks** and **Jane Basey**, of Austin TX, who have founded an enterprise they call WISDOM-link. Each month, Mary Jane and Jane invite 20-30 women to share a sandwich-and-salad lunch, hear the story of an invited guest, and share their own fascinating stories. This exciting program has been enormously successful, sparking continuing friendships and even more story-sharing. If this sounds interesting to you, why not try it for yourself? All you need are a few friends, a quiet place to meet, and an interesting story-teller to get things started. Mary Jane and Jane charge \$5 to cover the cost of the catered lunch—the stories are free!

Over the past year, the Austin Reading Circle has grown from the five or six who attended the first meeting to a regular attendance of about 15. What is a Reading Circle? Here's the way our Circle works. We meet for two hours at mid-day on the first Wednesday of the month and enjoy a brown bag lunch while we talk. Participants may join at any time. They pay \$10 for a "sample" session, while the 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 a week before each discussion session. Here is a list of the books we read this year:

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: A True Story, by Ruthie Bolton
A Match to the Heart, by Gretel Ehrlich
Long Quiet Highway, by Natalie Goldberg
Walking on Walnuts, by Nancy Ring

If you would like to create your own Reading Circle, we can help. We've prepared a one-page sheet of helpful hints on how to start a group, and we'd be glad to send you our study questions as well. Send a #10 SASE to Reading Circle Guide, Story Circle Network, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605. Another helpful guide is **The Reading Book Handbook**, by Rachel Jacobsohn. The book is subtitled "Everything You Need to Know, From Choosing Members to Leading Discussions." Our Guide and the **Reading Book Handbook** will help you get started. Please do, and let us know how it works for you! We'd love to feature your Reading Circle in a future issue of the *Journal*!

Life Writing for Publication

A New Feature by Dayna Finet

Human lives make the most fascinating reading.

As a grade-schooler, I roamed my small-town public library, always returning to the kiddie biographies. I read these stories about eminent people like Florence Nightingale and Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt over and over again. Now grown up, I still find a volume of journals or letters—the recording of a real person's life experience—more compelling than the best fiction, or poetry, or drama.

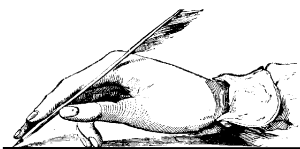
Publishers know that readers love life stories. Historically, biography and autobiography have consistently outsold other nonfiction genres. For all the commentary it has generated, the memoir craze of the last few years (*Having Our Say*, *Angela's Ashes*, *The Kiss*) only reflects a long-standing public enthusiasm for life stories.

If you want to publish your life writing—stories from your own life or about the lives of other fascinating women—you should feel encouraged. You can sell your work, to a variety of publishing markets. But how to do it? Like any other organizational culture, the publishing industry has its own values, professional expectations, and standard operating procedures. Knowing the rules and playing by them can improve your odds for successful publication. Beginning with the next issue of the *Story Circle Journal*, I'll contribute a regular column offering information and resources specifically for women who want to publish life writing. Upcoming topics include information about:

- ❖ references for the professional writer, such as *Writer's Market* and *Literary Marketplace*, plus reference guides that will help you create an effective, persuasive proposal;

- ❖ professional organizations that provide information and support to women life writers;
- ❖ literary agents;
- ❖ periodical markets for women's life writing, including women's service magazines, general and special interest magazines, and magazines that focus on contemporary culture
- ❖ markets for girls' and women's life writing in children's books and magazines;
- ❖ professional standards for queries and manuscript submissions;
- ❖ the whys and hows of self-publishing;
- ❖ Internet resources for women life writers
- ❖ Internet publication of women's life writing;
- ❖ help with researching and applying for grants to support women's life writing.

Having recently left a ten-year academic career, I now work full-time as a writer and editor. I have published magazine features on the topic of life writing and profiles of interesting people's lives. For two years, I wrote a column about members' professional lives for the Austin Writers' League. I also teach life writing workshops, and I am helping to write the workbook for the Older Women's Legacy Circle, sponsored by the Story Circle Network. In this regular column, I will be offering the kind of information and support that I have so gratefully received in my own writing career—with the hope that some day soon, I will see your writing in print!



Dear Pen Partner...

In this space, we will print (when we have it) information from women who are seeking an exchange of letters. Are you on e-mail? Include your e-mail address. Anybody want to volunteer to organize an e-Circle? Let's fill cyberspace with our stories!

Liz Patrick, 2737 N Columbus Blvd #3, Tucson AZ 85712-1961
 Carole Gene Deal, P.O. Box 708, Roebuck, SC 29376
 Katherine S. Dillon, WG4993, HB714u, Frontera CA 91720

Our Readers Share Their



Stories....

Lorraine Beck, Waukesha, WI.

I am 81 years old. I have started and stopped writing in my journal many times. Your magazine always gives me a lift and gets me started again. I look forward to finding each new edition in my mailbox. Keep sending them.

Mary Ellen Simms, Austin TX. I am celebrating 43 years of marriage, 42 years of motherhood, and 63 years of living. I am rich in friends and memories and am ready to add more fun to the living and more friends and memories.

Carole Gene Deal, Roebuck, SC I've been in love with stories and the telling of stories since I was a small child in the arms of my grandmother, who was a great teller of fairy tales. In college I majored in English. Now, at the age of 40, I find myself pursuing an Ed.S. degree in Marriage and Family Therapy. I have come to the belief that the best therapy is to be found in discovering one's story, and in having the opportunity to share that story with a kind and trustworthy person.

Liz Patrick, Tucson AZ. Today I

stand at a precipice that makes the Grand Canyon look minute. I view before me a future as vast as untold universes. And I think—at 52—as I rest in the hands of a Holy God: Why not take the plunge?!

Eula Rae McCown, Austin TX In 1975, at 48, I received a call from God to become a minister to the elderly. After attending and graduating from North Texas State University and Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary I was ordained a Cumberland Presbyterian minister but never hired by the church—they hire youth directors. Twelve years later I was hired by a Catholic church to be Coordinator for Seniors, serving approximately 5,000 elderly.

(Eula Rae also serves on our OWL-Circle Project Advisory Board.)

Victoria Ford, Austin TX. I grew up in, and am still very close to, a strong family unit in the military. I studied hard, overcame a learning disability, and am half-way through my masters degree. I have a good job that allows me to help people and to challenge my intellect. My

goal is to keep growing.

Kitty Rice, Austin TX. My grandmother lived in Manassas VA during the Civil War battles of Bull Run, near there, and rode railroad flatcars carrying wounded Confederate soldiers south to safe medical facilities, as well as giving water to wounded on the battlefield. I'd like to write of this and other Civil War stories—some humorous, some very sad.

Cathy Brothers, Chicago IL. I'm learning to listen to other women's stories in order to hear my own—not an echo, but the sound of my story in other people's voices. Thank you for a fine magazine. There's nothing else like it!

Leila Jacobs, Boston MA. The most important chapter of my story has just started. I'm getting a divorce after 22 years of marriage, which means finding out who I am now that I'm not somebody's wife. I welcome the chance to begin again. I can't wait to discover myself and my story.

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

Here is my check for \$_____. I want to join the Story Circle Network and receive four issues of *The Story Circle Journal*.

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Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ - _____

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

The

Guided Memoir Workshops for Women Over Sixty

Vol. 1 No. 1

Older Women's Guided Memoir Project Funded

The Story Circle Network, Inc., a nonprofit organization which encourages women to write and share their life stories, is pleased to announce that it has received a grant for \$100,000 from the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, of Houston TX, according to Susan Wittig Albert, Network president.

The grant supports the Older Women's Legacy Circle Project (OWL-Circle). Over the next two years, OWL-Circle will sponsor about 30 guided memoir-writing workshops for women over sixty. The memoir workshops will be held in the Austin TX area beginning in January 1999.

Albert reported that the project, which is co-directed by Mary Jane Marks and Catherine Cogburn, will eventually involve about 900 older women in a variety of living situations. "One of the project's goals is to create a caring community within which women can share memories and better understand their experiences," she added. Each of the workshops will publish a booklet containing the participants' writing, to share with families and friends, and additional funding is being sought to create a book of women's stories.

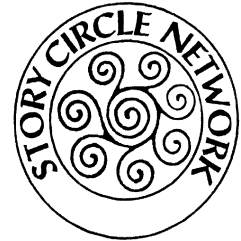
One major outcome of the project will be the development and testing of a memoir writer's workbook and

instructor's manual. The workbook and manual are designed for use in autobiography and memoir workshops in senior centers, day-care facilities, senior residences, and churches. At the close of the project, the Story Circle Network will publish the workbook and manual for national distribution.

The grant also provides for the development of an OWL-Circle web site and a print newsletter, so that news about its activities and progress can be readily shared. Because this is a unique project, in both its size and scope, Albert said, it is important to make sure that seniors and professionals who work with the elderly around the country can learn about it. "A web site and a newsletter are ideal ways to share information as it develops."

Other aspects of the project, Albert reported, are research and oral history components. Researchers from the University of Texas Department of Psychology will be working with project co-directors to learn more about the healing aspects of life-writing. Additional funding will be sought for the collection of oral autobiographies from frail elderly women unable to attend workshops.

The OWL-Circle Project co-directors will be working with many senior organizations and churches in the Austin area to schedule the first



OWL-Circle Project Staff

Co-Directors

Mary Jane Marks, M.Ed.
Catherine Cogburn, M.A. L.P.C

Project Advisory Board

Chris Attal

Parish Social Ministry, Diocese of Austin

Eartha Colson

Austin Parks and Recreation Dept.

Allison Downey

University of Texas

Rose Gabriel

AGE Alliance

Cathy Green,

Texas Chapter of AARP

Phyllis Griffith

Parish Nurse Programs

Nancy Lamb

Samaritan Counseling Center

Donna Loflin

Texas Assoc. of Homes & Services
for Aging

Eula Rae McCown

Senior Adult Ministry, St. Louis Church

Kendra Peters

Family Eldercare

Beverly Rawlings

Texas Dept. of Health

Mary Sapp

Texas Dept. of Aging

Pat Thomas

Renew

Gaye Thompson

Elderlaw attorney

Rachel Wahlberg

Women's Network Newsletter

Five ways you can be involved with the OWL-Circle Project

1. Become a participant.

We're hoping that hundreds of Austin-area women will join us to share in the wonderful experience of writing about our life experience and sharing our stories with others. Won't you be one of them?

2. Encourage your church or community group to host a workshop.

We're actively seeking sites in the Austin TX area for the second and third phases of our memoir project. If your church or community group would like to host a workshop, please let us know. Or if you know of a possible site but aren't sure whether it's appropriate, tell us about it and we'll check it out.

3. Become a trained workshop facilitator.

We are looking for Austin-area women who would like to lead a workshop. If you have experience (formal or informal) as a teacher or group leader and would like to be trained to help women tell their stories, we'd love to hear from you.

4. Volunteer to help with the workshops.

We need volunteers to help us (in a variety of ways) with the workshops and the participants. Please call and let us know that you're interested so we can include you as one of our special volunteers!

5. Become an OWL-Circle Associate.

If you're a professional who works with older women, we invite you to become an Associate and learn how to create an OWL-Circle, wherever you are.

Storytelling as a Healing Art

Telling our life stories is a healing art—something you already know if you've kept a journal or written about your life experiences. As Clarissa Pinkola Estés has written, "Stories are medicine."

Writing about our lives is a rewarding, healthy activity. As we explore ourselves in story, we become aware of the continuing flow of our lives that is beneath the discontinuous, fragmented surface of our experience. As we become conscious that the "I" who tells the story *is* a storyteller, we can trace out the paradoxical and even contradictory versions of ourselves that we create for different occasions, different audiences. Most important, as we become aware of ourselves as storytellers, we realize that what we understand and imagine about ourselves *is* a story. It is only one way of representing our experience, and can be reevaluated and revised as we learn new things about ourselves. This understanding is particularly important for older women and can result in feelings of increased competency and worth. Women who regularly write about themselves may gain coping skills and be better able to meet the difficult transitions of the later years.

But writing about our lives can be physically, as well as psychologically, healing. According to research carried out by University of Texas psychologist Dr. James Pennebaker, telling our personal stories can help to reduce stress, improve cognitive functioning, and enhance the immune system. Not talking or writing about important emotional events, Dr. Pennebaker believes, puts our health at risk, and we may suffer anxiety and depression and a variety of physical problems. Expressing our thoughts and feelings in writing while we relate our important life experiences, he says, can actually help us to feel better and live healthier lives. We will be testing some of Dr. Pennebaker's assumptions, and will report the outcomes through this newsletter and our website.

Want to become an OWL-Circle Associate?

If you are a life-writing teacher, a workshop organizer, or a professional who works with senior women anywhere (not just in the Austin TX area), you may become an OWL-Circle Associate. As an Associate, you will receive this newsletter, which will be published and mailed quarterly, free of charge, during the life of the project. The newsletter will keep you posted on our publications, activities, accomplishments, and continuing progress. (Actually, we hope that you'll like what we're doing so much that you'll want to copy OWL-Circle in your own local setting. As time goes on, we'll have more information about how you can do this, and some offers of help.)

Becoming an Associate is easy. Just send your name and address and a brief note about yourself and your interests to:

**OWL-Circle Project
Story Circle Network
3710 Cedar St, Box 11
Austin TX 78705**

We also welcome your inquiries about membership in the Story Circle Network. (See the story on page 4.)

Meet Our Project Directors

Mary Jane Marks, M.Ed.

If you're an active Austin senior or work with senior services, you've probably already met **Mary Jane Marks**, who is an enthusiastic advocate for vital aging. Mary Jane is known for her involvement and contributions to women's organizations in Austin and is the founder of WIN (The Women's Inclusive Network) and WISDOM-link. Both of these groups promote intergenerational programs and activities related to education, wellness, and spirituality.

Widowed within a few months after retirement from a long career in teaching and with an elderly mother to care for, Mary Jane turned to adult education. Trained to work with caregivers and provide outreach to older adults, especially women, she now serves as a volunteer on several boards. She represents the Older Adult Connection with faith communities in Austin Metropolitan Ministries and Catholic Charities and will serve as president of the Texas Catholic Association for Third Age Ministry in the 1999-2000 term.

In the OWL-Circle Project, Mary Jane is responsible for convening the Advisory Board, identifying the workshop sites, helping to identify and train the teams of workshop facilitators, and representing OWL-Circle to the various senior communities. She is a passionate advocate for women and committed to encouraging women's intergenerational storytelling. ("I have a loud voice, too," she says with a laugh. "I learned a long time ago to speak up if I wanted to get my point across.") Story Circle Network is delighted that Mary Jane is speaking up for the OWL-Project!

Catherine Cogburn, M.A., LPC

Catherine comes to the OWL-Circle Project via her work as a psychotherapist specializing in grief issues for adults and children and a two-year position as Director of School Outreach Program for the Austin Center For Attitudinal Healing. Those who have worked with Catherine value her ability to respond personally and sympathetically, to stand calm and serene in the midst of chaos, and to make calm, thoughtful contributions to the most heated policy discussions. (She's a whiz with budgets and grant proposals, too!)

Catherine is a Texas native who grew up in West Texas and earned her degrees from Texas A&M University at Kingsville (yes, it's true—she's an Aggie!) She developed and managed the Life/Work Experiential Program at Our Lady of the Lake University and served on the faculty of the Continuing Education Department at San Antonio College. Since 1987, she has worked as a psychotherapist in a variety of settings in Houston and Austin, in addition to providing career counseling for employees affected by downsizing. She serves on the board of the Story Circle Network.

Catherine wears a variety of hats in the OWL-Circle Project. She is responsible for coordinating the project's research components, publicity and public relations, the production of the project's publications and the website, evaluation, and the budget. You'll also be able to read her work in the project workbook, because she is one of the four instructional developers who are creating the workbook. But OWL-Circle isn't Catherine's only story-telling project. She is currently developing a grant proposal that will link Story Circle with the Austin Breast Cancer Resource Center, in a project that will encourage women to tell their stories about breast cancer. Way to go,

The Owl-Circle Project: Five Phases

We are completing **Phase One** of the project (planning the workshops and designing the workbook) right now. We are also preparing a web site and beginning to publish a quarterly newsletter (this issue is the first one) to let people around the country know about the project.

Phase Two will take place in early 1999, when we will offer ten workshops to test the Project Workbook and experiment with different ways to organize and offer the workshops. We will evaluate the workbook and rewrite it in time to offer another round of workshops during **Phase Three** (Summer, 1999). At this time, we will expand the workbook to include a variety of optional writing exercises and topics for additional workshop activities.

Phase Four involves another 10 workshops and will take place in late 1999 and early 2000. In **Phase Five**, (mid 2000) we will finish our evaluations and make the workbook available for national distribution.

Some of our activities are still in the planning stages. In Phases Two-Four, we hope to be working with researchers from the University of Texas to learn more about the health benefits of telling our life stories, and to invite them to become involved with the workshops. As additional funding becomes available, we plan to send volunteers to nursing homes to collect additional stories. And with the University of Texas Press, we are also exploring the possibility of publishing a book of women's stories. We're excited about all these wonderful opportunities!

Story Circle's New & Renewing Members

We extend a very special welcome to the women who have joined our Network or renewed their membership since the last Journal was published. We're glad to be a part of your story—and hope that you'll become part of ours!

California

Patricia Jones, San Jose
Kathy Dillon, Frontera
Linda Joy Meyers, Richmond
Emily Hubbert, Mt. View
Mary Nosker, Ridgecrest

Iowa

Eleanor Larson, Oelwein

Louisiana

Charlotte Hamrick, New Orleans

Michigan

Kay Sturgeon, Wixom

New Mexico

Allenda Wolfmueller, Albuquerque

New York

Susan Riback, Slingerlands

Oregon

Annette Wager, Tualatin

Pennsylvania

Jean Fleischauer, Pittsburgh
Florence Carretta, Pittsburgh
Linda Wisniewski, Doylestown
Anne K. Waldron, West Chester

South Carolina

Carole Gene Deal, Roebuck

Texas

Mary Kate Kell, Houston
Ann Kriss, Austin
Mary Ellen Simms, Austin
Sara N. Lundy, Sunrise Beach
Ann Swain, Freeport
Gwen Wells, Austin
Joyce Dolzell, Austin
Judy Barrett, Georgetown
Jean Ramsey, Houston
Marsha Fowler, Austin

Heather Young, Dallas
Gaye Thompson, Austin
Katherine Rice, Austin
Sarah Durfor, Austin
Lydia Griffith, Austin
Victoria Ford, Austin
Karen Reagan, Austin
Rhea Thomas, Austin
Jessica Ortiz, Austin

Virginia

Mary Faith Pankin, Arlington

West Virginia

Alicia Tyler, Charleston

Wisconsin

Lorraine Beck, Waukesha

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