

Story Circle Journal

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

Volume 3 Number 1

Story Circle Stays Busy



The past few months have been extraordinarily busy ones for our small organization here in Austin TX. We've had the normal business of the Story Circle Network—the publication of the *Journal*, board meetings, our holiday party, the newly-organizing Austin Circle chapter, our annual board planning session, and the development of our spring program schedule. That's a lot of work for any organization, and we're all volunteers—until we can raise the money to fund our national office and hold our first national conference! So pardon us, please, while we pat

ourselves on the back for several months of hard but rewarding work.

An important part of our work over the past months has been the on-going development of the OWL Circle project (the Older Women's Legacy Circle), for which we received a grant of \$100,000 last year. The core of the project is a series of thirty guided memoir workshops for women over sixty and offered through churches, senior organizations and residences, and continuing education programs. The theme of the project—*Memoirs: Piecing Together the Patterns of our Lives*—is borrowed from the familiar motif of quilting

To guide participants' writing, our project co-directors assembled a team of instructional writers who created an eight-chapter workbook and an accompanying facilitators' manual. Then they recruited a group of facilitators who are using the workbook and manual in workshops this spring. After the first round of ten workshops (in February, March, and April), the workbook and manual will be revised and rewritten for use in a second round of workshops later this year. A third round is planned for early next year. Each of the workshops will create its own booklet, so the participants can see their stories in print.

Several people have contributed to the project's growth and development. Mary Jane Marks worked through the autumn months to assemble the team of facilitators and select the sites, while Catherine Cogburn managed the business end of things and helped with the workbook. Susan Albert organized the writing team and edited the first draft of the workbook. Now, Dayna Finet has taken Mary Jane's place and will be working with Catherine as the project moves on through its next stages.

The OWL-Circle project is unique in many ways. It is the largest guided memoir project ever, the first to be focused exclusively on women, and (of course) the first to focus on older women. When the workbook and facilitator's manual have gone through the various revisions and some

*We are here to witness the
creation and to abet it.*

—Annie Dillard

*Creativity can be described as
letting go of certainties.*

—Gail Sheehy



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expansion, the SCN will publish it and make it available at an affordable cost to senior organizations around the United States. We want to encourage every senior organization in the country to make it possible for older women to tell their stories—to leave their legacies of experience and wisdom for those of us who come after.

If we've been a little slow in answering mail or filling your requests, please forgive us. As a friend (and SC volunteer) said recently, "It isn't as if we've been spending every day at the beauty parlor!"

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

www.owlcircle.org



Story Circle

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

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

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

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

Compiling a Family History

Creating a family history is an important part of telling and understanding our own life stories. The more we learn about the family that shaped us, the more we learn about *ourselves* and the more we may understand the shape of our lives and the directions we have taken. If you haven't done so already, now is the time to make a notebook containing your family's history. Here are some ideas to get you started.

Making a Genealogy

Your genealogy—a list of the names and dates of birth and death—is an essential part of your family history. Begin by listing the full names of your brothers and sisters and the dates of their births and deaths (if relevant). Then list your parents (using the same information) and their siblings, followed by your grandparents and their siblings. Following this pattern, trace the family history as far as you can. If you know how to construct a family tree (some helpful how-to books are listed at the right), you can create it now. Place your lists and/or your tree at the beginning of your notebook, then use dividers to create a special section for each generation—your generation (you and your siblings), your parents' generation, your grandparents' generation, and so on.

Expanding Your Genealogy

To expand and give life to the basic family information, you can create an individual page for each member of each generation. It will probably be relatively easy to do this for yourself or your brothers and sisters, but harder with the earlier generations. Here are a few of the life facts you may want to include for each person:

- ❖ place of birth, death
- ❖ marriage (date/place), names of spouse, children
- ❖ education
- ❖ work, military service, community contributions, special achievements

Not Just the Facts, Please

As you're compiling this factual information, you will recall or be

reminded of special bits of personal information about the individuals in your family history. You may remember that Aunt Jane traveled around the world, or that Great-Uncle Hank sold apples during the Depression, or that your great-great grandfather was said to raise the finest horses in the county. Write down whatever you can remember. Include a photo or two, if you have them—the picture itself may spark even more memories of your relationship to this person. As far as you are able, flesh out the factual account of your family members by collecting additional impressions and memories.

What Else?

A family history can include lots of different kinds of information and material. For instance, you might ask each living member of your family to contribute a page or two about themselves—their own brief life history—and some photographs. If they don't want to write it down, perhaps they'd be willing to record it onto a cassette. (You can buy a plastic page for your notebook, to hold the cassettes.)

You might also ask family members to contribute something they have created or done that can become a permanent part of the family record: a story or group of poems, a collection of recipes, photographs of a hobby, travel notes on a special trip.

Another way to flesh out your family history is to conduct interviews with older family members, collecting information about their lives and encouraging them to share their memories of previous generations. These oral histories can be written down or recorded on cassettes. You may be surprised at the family stories that emerge when your grandmother starts remembering her life!

Using New Technologies

If you have access to a computer, you might want to look into some genealogy software that can help you create your family tree. In fact, you may even want to start collecting your information on the

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

Genealogy

The Genealogist's Sourcebook and Companion, by Emily Anne Croom

Guide to Genealogical Research in the National Archives, National Archives Trust Foundation

Genealogy Online for Dummies, by Matthew Helm (includes CD-Rom with family-tree programs)

Ancestors: A Beginner's Guide to Family History & Genealogy, by Jim Willard

The Everything Family Tree Book: Finding, Charting, & Preserving Your Family History, by William G. Hartley

Unpuzzling Your Past: A Basic Guide to Genealogy, by Emily Anne Croom

Beyond Genealogy

To Our Children's Children: Preserving Family History for Generations to Come, by Bob Greene

A Family History Logbook, Reinhard Klein

Preserving Family Memories: A Guide to Creating Oral History, by Marc A. Seligman

From Family Tree to Family History, Ruth Finnegan, Editor

From Family History to Community History, W.T.R. Pryce, Editor

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 reminds us that the journal is the place where creativity finds its most delightful expression.

About Creativity

To me, creativity in the journal, or the term “creative journaling,” is redundant.

By definition, journal writing **is** creative.

It's the diarist's way of transforming the events, thoughts feelings and iDeas of the day into something else. Turning them into Art.

The art in my journal is mostly word art

Or maybe I mean **wordplay**...using words themselves in as many ways as possible.

For example, considering the month of March in terms of **MARCHING**, and what drummer's music

I hear (to paraphrase the creative Henry David Thoreau). Or

runningmywordstogethertoformanewword. Or

D
R
O
P
P
I
N
G

the letters when I feel like it

Your creativity can express itself *visually* in a journal as well. There's collage—

clipping illustrations from magazines, catalogs, brochures, etc. and

layering them, or using them as the starting point of an entry.

“Walk into the picture” and describe what you're doing there, what you see, how you feel, what it smells like.

Rubber-stamping is another way to add art to the journal. (I recommend oil-based inks because they don't bleed through thin pages.) The variety of rubber stamp images available is astounding.

If you can think of it, there's a stamp for it!

If you can sketch, sketch! (If not, consult Hannah Hinchman, Frederick Franck, Betty Edwards.)

To be artfully inspired, look at the diaries of Frida Kahlo. Sometimes all you need to do is cover the paper with **COLOR**. (I did that, in shades of gray, when the weather was nothing but shades of gray for a few days in a row.) Or imitate **SARK**. Buy yourself a pack of magic markers and be a kid again. Or buy pens with green ink to use on St. Patrick's Day...pastels for an Easter Sunday entry.

To feel creative, read books about creativity. I'm currently swimming in the words of Julia Cameron (*The Right to Write*), Naomi Epel (*The Observation Deck* is very creative), and Phil Cousineau (*The Art of Pilgrimage*) on traveling creatively. I find that the more I immerse myself in things creative, the more creative

I become.

Try it!

The Creative Woman

by Judith Helburn

Judith serves on the Story Circle Network Board of Directors and teaches Spiritual Eldering workshops in Austin TX. This excerpt (from a longer article) was written for the older women in her groups, but there's a creative truth here for women of any age.

Where did it go?

As Women of a Certain Age, we have a unique opportunity to explore our creativity because there are fewer demands on us, but our attitudes may get in the way. We may have concentrated our creative abilities on raising our children or nurturing our career. We may feel that we are not creative at all. We may not sing in the shower; we may not be able to draw a straight line or a circle; we may not even get the punch line of a joke straight. And we may have problems writing a letter, much less a poem or a story. Creativity? Maybe someone else. Certainly not us!

How we have been socialized! When was it that the natural inclination toward our creative self disappeared? Each element probably buried itself some time at the end of our childhood. It may have been a well-intentioned teacher who told us that a house is not purple, or criticized our creative spelling, so that the joy of putting our thoughts on paper became a chore. Listen to small children making up songs about their day. They may be out of tune, but their singing is delightful. Singing in tune can be taught. Singing for the joy of life cannot. Watch a child pretending. Watch a child dancing or playing with art materials. No questions about creativity there. That doesn't mean that this child is another Picasso or Mozart—it means that the connection to experimentation and exploration has not yet been buried. There are those whose connection is so strong that they will go against convention from early life and continue to listen inward and grow creatively, but they are the exception. Most of us bury our unsprouted seeds of creativity so deeply that we must dig into our personal gardens to find them.

Rediscovering Our Creativity

We can do it. In fact, younger women are counting on us to show them their way. Here is what one younger friend of mine wrote to me:

It seems that women I know in their 50's are really themselves...authentic...they have the guts to let their whole selves out...One incredible woman I met in Papua New Guinea who lives in San Francisco started up a bed and breakfast with her sisters in Wisconsin—a special place for quilters, historians, and other special interest groups to meet....Another woman I met in Peru is going into arts management and performance... She's taking singing lessons, working as a production assistant and loving every moment. She is so alive!

To begin opening your own bloom of creative achievement may be as simple as planting a garden or flower, and saying to yourself, "As these plants grow, so can my creativity. And as these flowers bloom, so can I open petal after petal, exposing myself to more and more creative energy." But we must be willing to dig deeply into the soil of our hidden selves, to turn our compost, to expose pain, to expose memories and loosen

that soil so that the roots of our creativity can expand and grow.

Doing It

Your time has arrived. My artist friend, Lynda, who is in her 80's, said of her life when she was raising children and being generally productive:

What did I do? I cooked. Very creative, very creative. I knitted, I crocheted, I did lots of things that were creative, and when people tell me they don't do it, that's just not true. To make a good cherry pie is one of the most creative things anybody can do.

I didn't consider myself creative until I was nearly fifty. At that time, I asked about a dozen friends to give me a small object that could be put on a treasure necklace, which I would have made for my birthday. When I had the objects, along with some others I had acquired in the Orient, a jeweler friend said she would help me put it together myself. Because of that necklace, I made and sold jewelry for the next eight years. It was as if my horizon had expanded ten fold.

How? Suggestions and Examples

How do we rediscover our creative side? It may be hard to start on our own. Perhaps we could first evaluate what we love and appreciate. Is it fine cooking? visiting art galleries? gardening? reading? Look for a class, a book, a workshop. Start small. Join the *Story Circle Network* and form a group. Get together with friends and brainstorm or go through a book on developing creativity together. Having support is crucial early on.

When I began my first class in clay sculpture a few years ago, I had the skills of a preschooler and the inhibitions of an adult. The growth in my skills and the reduction in my inhibition continue to delight me. It is both great therapy and a builder of patience. And it is fun!

Another way to open up to your creativity is to make a collage about yourself—five years from now. Gather old magazines, ribbons and other items small enough to glue onto a poster board. After a quiet time in which you imagine the ideal self of five years hence, go at it with scissors, markers, pictures and words. If you are with a group, at the end of the session explain with your posters who you will be. And then pledge to do it!

This is just a beginning. Let yourself flower and flourish. Rediscover yourself. They say that as we age, we complete our cycle and return to our childhood. Let us make that a positive statement. How wonderful it is have the wisdom of our accumulated years and the wonder and awe of childhood. You owe it to yourself, as a reflection of whatever manifestation of the Divine Being you are comfortable with, to bloom and to co-create.

The Path of the Artist: Writing the Story of Our Creativity

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.

The female hero reaches full individual potential, taking enormous personal risks, orchestrating many times the death of her former self and nurturing the emergence of a new, more integrated self. The female hero is the woman living a creative lifestyle. Her discovery is the unfolding of the self-defined, creative woman who lives within

There are no mistakes. What happens during the process of making something is sacred and organic.
—Vicki Noble

Invention is the natural outcome of creative thinking.—SARK

Yes, creation is moving toward us; life is moving toward us all the time. We back away, but it keeps pushing toward us.
—Joan Halifax

Creating



Creativity is a central force in our lives, powering our spirit, raising our energy, making us feel vibrant and alive. When we're not feeling creative, life is . . . well, dull. Our energies sag, our spirits falter, and we're not sure there's a good reason to get up in the morning.

But before we go any further, let's get one thing straight. Let's not confuse creativity with *products*—poetry, drawings, craft objects, and so on. The creative process doesn't have to result in a thing—it can result in an idea, a dream, a solution, an adventure. Creating often involves connecting old things together in new and unexpected ways, resulting in something different. This process is natural for women, who see things holistically (as opposed to linearly) and who may find it easier to reconcile opposites (another creative act). In fact, according to psychologist Abraham Maslow, women are usually *process-oriented*, as opposed to *product-oriented*.

So let's start our chapter on creativity not by writing about the things we've made, but the times in our lives when we have been deeply engaged in the process of creating. To make this easier, we'll begin with a time-line, so we can more easily explore the different phases of our woman's life. Start by listing the decades of your life (either by the calendar years, or your age. Example, at 59, I am completing my sixth decade.) Now, look back at each of these decades and ask yourself these questions:

- ❖ When in this decade did I feel most spontaneous? What was I doing then?
- ❖ What activity gave me energy and spark and fizz?
- ❖ When did I feel passionately about something?

As you come up with the answers, jot them down. (If you come up with more than one response for the decade, write them *all* down!) Here's a jotting from my own list, from the decade of my thirties, when I had just started my career as a college teacher:

I felt most spontaneous in the classroom, when the students (especially the graduate students) had done their work and I had done mine. Teaching was free-wheeling and fun, improvisational, like jazz. Lots of spark and electricity—new ideas literally sparked off old ones. And movement and passion: I felt like a dancer, in love with dancing a dance no one had ever danced before!

Now, look back on what you've just created. What do you see? On my sheet of

paper, I see six brief paragraphs full of things I hadn't thought of for quite a while. They remind me of wonderful times, times of joy and adventure, when I felt bold and brazen and bigger than life. My six paragraphs tell the exciting story (one of the stories, anyway, for I'm sure there are others that I've left out) of my creative life and my creative growth.

Before we go on, you might want to take a few minutes to think about your own creative growth. Here are some perspectives from which you might look at it (you may be able to think of others):

- ❖ evolutionary—how your creative energies evolved from one period to another in your life (from childhood to adolescence to young/middle/late maturity, or in Goddess terms, from Persephone to Demeter to Hecate)
- ❖ developmental—how your creative energies matured (choose your own definition of maturity!)
- ❖ exploratory—how you used your creative energies to explore new areas, meet new challenges
- ❖ social—how your creative energies attracted you to different people or groups, and how these influences shaped your creative growth

Now, go back to your original paragraphs and add a sentence or two from each of these different perspectives, as it seems appropriate. This will help you flesh out your creative history, enabling you to see it from many different angles.

Making Something Creative

Now that we've got the fundamental principle straight—that creativity is a *process*—we're ready to write about products: the things our creative energies have fired us to make and do throughout our lives.



Oops! I thought I heard somebody say, *But I don't write poetry!* *My drawings have never been hung!* One of the biggest road-blocks in the path of the artist is our society's definition of the creative product. If a painting isn't in a gallery, it isn't art. If a poem isn't published, it isn't poetry. These silly definitions come from the art industry's rule book and we can just forget them. (Unless, of course, you are or want to be part of the art industry, in which case you may find yourself playing by its rules.)

So now let's think about the things we have made that gave us great joy, that felt *creative*, that filled us with energy and life. Make a list of five things—yes, right off the top of your head, without thinking a lot about it—that you've made in your life that fit your own definition of creativity. Include a bit of description too. As an example, here is Wanda's list, from a workshop we did together:

- ❖ a drawing of some trees and skaters, when I was about 11 (Mom still has it!)
- ❖ a quilt I made last year, starting from a pattern and ending with my own design
- ❖ my garden (it changes all the time, wild colors and weird plants)
- ❖ my recipe for bean soup
- ❖ my daughter's wedding dress (white lace, silk, ribbons, a masterpiece!)

Wanda wanted to explore her creativity by writing about these items, so I encouraged her to use at least one page for each one. I asked her to start by

Creativity is our species' natural response to the challenges of human experience.
—Adriana Diaz

Magic has often been thought of as the art of making dreams come true; the art of realizing visions. Yet before we can bring birth to the vision . . . we have to see it.
—Starhawk

Cooking is just as creative and imaginative an activity as drawing, or wood carving, or music. And cooking draws upon your every talent—science, mathematics, energy, history, experience—and the more experience you have the less likely are your experiments to end in drivel and disaster. The more you know, the more you can create.

The whole idea of freeing the creative spirit is reclaiming the power that each person has had from birth. It's a birthright to be a creative person.—Adriana Diaz

Remembering the past gives power to the present.—Fae Myenne Ng

To whatever degree you listen and follow your intuition, you become a creative channel for the higher power of the universe.
Shakti Gawain

Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground.—Rumi

*The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky,
No higher than the soul is high*
—Edna St. Vincent Millay


A #2 pencil and a dream can take you anywhere.—Joyce Myers

collecting a sketch of the creative project, or including a photocopy or a photograph. Then I asked her to consider these questions:

- ❖ When did I make this? Why? What was the situation?
- ❖ Where did I get the ideas for the project? Was I influenced by something I saw or read or heard?
- ❖ What did I enjoy about the project? What did it teach me?
- ❖ What makes this project especially important to me?
- ❖ What else do I want to say about it?

When Wanda finished answering these questions, she found she had written nearly ten pages and had learned a great many things about herself as a creative artist—not the least of which was a new appreciation of her creative gifts!

Doing Something Creative

 It's easier to see our creativity when it comes to making things—and a little harder to see ourselves as creative *doers*. And yet, creation does not always result in a tangible product—a drawing, a recipe, a wedding dress, a poem. More often, the result is something we do, rather than make—another process, in fact! Here is a paragraph Sarah wrote in a class, about a wilderness camping trip she had made the year before:

The most creative thing I've done in my life was to go on a solo camping trip to a primitive area in New Mexico. I'd camped before, but always with someone, and always in a safe environment (ie a campground). This time, I was on my own, no safety net, nobody to bail me out. I had to figure out how to set up my camp, how to use my time, how to connect with the wilderness. It was risky, it was scary, it made me feel powerful—maybe in part because my husband and my mother didn't want me to go. The trip turned my life upside down and helped me to see a side of myself I'd never before known.

The creative experience—doing something entirely new and different, breaking old rules, challenging somebody else's *shoulds*, taking new risks, making new moves, —often results in enormous personal change, and energizes us in ways that are hard to describe and even harder to measure. When we write about these experiences, we can begin to get clear on our motives and the (often intangible) results. In fact, it is often only some time *after* an intensely creative experience that we can begin to understand it: after we've lived through it (or survived it, depending on the circumstances); after we've got some distance on it (a few months, maybe even a few years); after we've assimilated the creative changes into our lives.

Now you try it. Write about the five most important creative experiences of your life. They might have occurred in your personal life, with your family or your church or community; or perhaps in your work life. They might have taken place at home or in a distant country. They might have involved some sort of creative problem-solving or risk-taking or bridge-burning—and probably required you to break some rules, change some old patterns, or challenge somebody's expectations. And when we get right down to it, the most creative experiences are the ones most likely to break rules, change patterns, and challenge other people's definitions of us!

Living A Creative Life-Style



From the beginnings of our nation, Americans have valued personal independence. Right? Well, yes, in some ways—we treasure our political independence and our economic independence, and Independence Day has important cultural significance. But when you get right down to it, we live in a society of conformists, who measure our success by social standards: where we work and live, how much money we make, what kind of house we live in. We also live in a society of critics, who measure our efforts by their standards of perfection. It takes a highly creative woman to challenge these measurements of success and to build a lifestyle that expresses all of her creative energies.

As we tell our stories to ourselves and explore their multiple and changing meanings, we begin to understand the many ways we have been creative in the past—and we may wish we could find more ways to nurture and honor our creative spirits. Some of the articles in this issue of *The Story Circle Journal* suggest ways you can do this: through journaling, through story circles, in your writing, in your reading, in dancing and other forms of art. Now might be a very good time for you to look back over the story of your creative life (as you've developed it through the exercises in this piece) and think about the directions you might like to go in the future—rather like outlining the next chapter of your creative life! Here are some questions to get you started:

- ❖ What would you like to make?
- ❖ What would you like to do?
- ❖ What creative experiences would you like to explore?
- ❖ What resources might you need to help you make/do/explore?
- ❖ Where might you find these resources?
- ❖ How might you change your life in order to make room for more creativity?

And if you think that it might be better to just “let creativity happen,” consider this: our society prefers that we conform to its rules, rather than change them, and it often penalizes the creative person. Living a creative lifestyle takes a deep desire, a strong intention, and an ability to take risks. While it sometimes “just happens,” more often we have to help it happen!

Here are some books to  help you nurture and encourage your creativity:

The Woman's Book of Creativity, by C. Diane Ealy
The Possible Human, by Jean Houston
The Artist's Way and Vein of Gold, by Julia Cameron
The Live Your Dreams Workbook, by Joyce Chapman

*A sheltered life can be a daring life
 as well. For all serious daring
 starts from within.*
 —Eudora Welty

*We must overcome the notion that
 we must be regular . . . it robs us of
 the chance to be extraordinary.*
 —Uta Hagen

*So long as you write what you wish
 to write, that is all that matters, and
 whether it matters for ages or only
 for hours, nobody can say. But to
 sacrifice a hair of the head of your
 vision, a shade of its color, in
 deference to some Headmaster with
 a silver pot in his hand or to some
 professor with a measuring-rod up
 his sleeve, is the most abject
 treachery.*—Virginia Woolf

Hope is a very un-ruly emotion.
 —Gloria Steinem

*Invent your world. Surround
 yourself with people, color, sounds,
 and work that nourish you.*
 —SARK

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.

May, 1999—Mother, Mother (deadline April 15, 1999)
August, 1999—Sisters & Sisterhood (deadline July 15, 1999)
November, 1999—New Beginnings (deadline October 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 contributions. We want to hear from you!

Creativity in Unexpected Situations

The human mind and spirit are very free, as we allow it to be. There is no one who can chain down creativity within us, not even in prison!

Creativity brings for life to a person's well-being. I have seen this in the prison where I am serving a long-term sentence.

I have seen hands that, once abused, make beautiful pieces of pottery. I have seen hands that once shot drugs create beautiful artwork in the various mediums of oil pastels, oil painting, watercolors, and various colors of ink.

I have seen the hands of mental health patients create beautiful crocheted and knitted items. These mental health patients have also produced many beautiful pieces of artwork and other forms of handicrafts, as well as poetry.

Some of the most talented and artistic women are here for life sentences. They have chosen as part of their healing process methods of creativity such as writing articles, poems, and daily journals. Many have had their written words published!

It is creative expression in its many forms that enables us to heal and makes us whole people again. This part of our freedom is inside of us—whether the path of the artist is in an art studio in Paris or in a prison cell, serving a life sentence!

Kathy Dillon
W64993 HB714U
Frontera CA 91720

The Path of the Artist: Creativity in Our Lives

She wanted to glide radiantly along a smooth path, bringing joy and creating masterpieces effortlessly on life's canvas; but her soul was boxed in by circumstances much more powerful than she could ever be. Her birth order (she was her father's last chance for a boy) boxed her in. Frowns from neighbors and teachers who were threatened by her tomboyish strength and lack of girlish timidity boxed her in. Grief beyond comprehension at her brother's death, an only brother who left on a motorcycle and never returned, unmercifully boxed her in. A culture that concealed information, paid less for identical work men performed, and loathed to uphold her rights over her own body boxed her in. Prison handcuffs, causing her to struggle to use the toilet on a speeding bus, boxed her in beyond the ultimate.

Her spirit radiated through its walls to discover dolls in

bottle caps, toothpicks and cotton. Her spirit escaped its boundaries by chasing lizards in the Sierra Nevadas, by sensing gold miners' ghosts as tangible as the looming presence of the mountains, by seeing faces to be liberated out of sandstone rocks. Her spirit strengthened by squeezing itself through the bars of her cell window and running in eternal fields of green grass worlds just beyond the concertina wire. Her spirit soared through textbooks spilling forth answers to ageless, tormenting questions—they explained how she *mattered*, she *belonged*, and the God of the Universe smiled upon her birdsong and ideas and creations out of painful chaos. She wrote her name upon the face of eternity.

Annie
Gatesville TX

The Closing Window

The new year came and with it a time for renewal...or so I thought. Three days into the year I had extensive breast reconstruction surgery, followed by a long and painful recovery. Then, more surgery, with anesthetic to re-fog my brain. I recovered four two days. On the third day, the phone rang and my world disintegrated. Stephen was in the hospital, in intensive care. He had been there fourteen hours. Fourteen hours! He had fallen asleep at the wheel, his Jeep had hit a large boulder, and Lida was killed. Steve had a concussion, multiple facial cuts, bruises, and a compound fracture of his right arm. He was critical. He was delirious...and he was a child again. But he was alive. And that's when I felt the window close.

That closing is not a new sensation. I've known it before in times of crises with my children or my husband. It's a shutting down of feelings. There is just that instant when everything stops and an emptiness washes over me. It's a deadness, a "Stop" sign that forbids the entry of thought or sensation.

Soon Stephen came home to our house with all of his sorrow, and last week the surgeon had another go at repair on my body. This week the courts had another go at Stephen, and I feel apart at yesterday's court appearance.

I wonder how long it will take for the window to open this time.

Patricia Jones
San Jose CA

The Seeds of Creativity

A dozen years ago, my mother and I walked out to her garden, where the hollyhocks—apricot and peach and red and white—were growing along the fence. Mother gathered a handful of the papery seed pods. It’s easy, she said. Scratch up the earth, sprinkle the seeds, drop a little straw or some leaves on top, and the hollyhocks will take care of the rest.

She was right. At home, I made a bed along the garage and planted the seeds. In the spring, there they were—tiny and green. And that’s the way they stayed all year! Where were my mother’s tall beauties? Where were those blooming summertime lovelies? Not to worry, Mother said. It takes a little while. Wait another year. But weed. Don’t let them get smothered.

Right again. I cultivated, keeping the weeds out. The next spring, there they were, larger now, very green. And by summer, they had shot up head-high, decorated with glorious flowers, apricot, peach, red, white. And I thought, creativity is like that. I see someone else’s creative act and it inspires creativity in me. Make a place for it, scratch up my life, take a lesson, read a book, learn how-to. Practice some, let it lie (mulched) for a while, practice some more, admire the little shoots. Let it grow another year, cultivate, keep the weeds out. Then stand back and admire the blooms. And oh what blooms!

Jacquie Jacobs
Chicago IL

Love

The sun, the moon
rise & fall as each breath again
makes its journey through our soul

The heart beats
life . . . life . . . life . . .
through the veins that hold us connected
to all the systems that keep us alive

love flows divine

Rivers, mountains, dirt
from which we are born again & again
forever replenish our physical bodies
so that our souls
through spirit
can meet again & again
to eternally recreate the dance of life & love
we so enjoy entangling ourselves in.

Susan Durfor
Austin TX



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For Life Writing Teachers....

On Creativity

by Dianne Lodge-Peters

Contributing Editor Dianne Lodge-Peters lives, teaches workshops, and writes every day in Evergreen AL. Her article reminds us that even (especially?) teachers need practice. We can't encourage others' creativity unless we nurture and support our own.



Writer William Faulkner was once asked about creativity and inspiration. “I show up at the typewriter every morning at 9 a.m.,” he said. “Fortunately, inspiration shows up about a half-hour later.”

Nearly every writer whose profile or interview appears in print says, “Write every day.” For that is the writer’s task—to write every day, on a regular basis, keeping to a schedule which may be loose or tight, done in rain or shine, heat or cold, whether you feel like it or not. Tasks such as everyday writing are taxing; they are demands made difficult by having been imposed. Yet writers engage the tasks of their own free will. From fingers through a pen onto empty paper or from fingers tapping on a keyboard onto a blank screen, the task takes shape. Its structure is a string of words that make sense. Several strings of words. A multitude of strings of words: warm-up exercises, freewrites, entries in a diary, letters to mail (or not), revisions—all strings of words that make sense. Sometimes the words roll off the fingers like sweet honey drips from warm toast; sometimes they’re trapped inside the heart of an iceberg so hard that it resists every stroke of the pen.

Tasks lead to practice. Every day that writers tax themselves in tasks, they also practice. Practice means doing exercises such as musicians do when they run scales and arpeggios, as well as memorizing and rehearsing their “piece” for performance. And practice also means to ply the craft and serve readers as physicians do when they minister to patients. [It also has a spiritual dimension, as Natalie Goldberg suggests when she uses the term “writing practice” to describe the connection between daily writing and daily meditation or prayer.—Ed.]

To honor the practice by engaging the tasks invariably delivers not just the stories that are yours to tell but also those you ought not to. It took me several

years, for example, to accept that the “war stories” I could tell about my earlier workplace were not mine to write about. Only when I saw a string of words so packed with meaning that they mutated from two to three dimensions did I also see that certain strings of words yielded depths of meaning which sang to me, like liturgy in a religious service.

Like liturgy too, it’s the practice of writing that fulfills the ritual we honor each time we create a string of words that sings. Rituals are like rites; they are special acts that, put together into a bundle, become ceremonies accompanying critical moments in our lives. These moments are crossroads which often mark change. One does become a woman, for example, want to or not, but when a rite of passage accompanies a girl’s first blood, we recognize and honor the change from youth to maturity. Likewise, to honor a woman’s last blood via another rite of passage also honors her entry into the elder or “wisdom” years.

A ritual is any act that brings the sacred into everyday life. Do it regularly, keeping to a schedule which may be flexible or strict, in season or out, and you honor the practice as sacred. When the ritual of writing discovers the stories that are yours to tell—because no one else can tell them as you can—then comes the creative magic. Such magic is sacred: you feel touched by a divine finger, moved to laugh and cry at the same instant, made innocent and naive like a child, and changed from what you can never be again.

This is the epiphany of writing. I believe that as writers we are as creative as any “gifted” musician, sculptor, physician, or teacher. The magic of creativity is not so much divinely inspired as it is hard won. Writers work at their strings of words every day so that the potential for creativity can come into their work. Creativity is the sum total of task, practice, ritual, and a sacred potential which affirms, enhances, and enriches all human life.

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.

***Maps to Ecstasy: Teachings of an Urban Shaman* and *Sweat Your Prayers: Movement as Spiritual Passage*, both by Gabrielle Roth**

We've excerpted this piece from a "musing" sent to us by Dancer Paulette Rees-Denis. It originally appeared in her newsletter Caravan Trails, which she edits for the Northwest Tribal Bellydancing Community. Not strictly a book review, Paulette's musing is an evocative tribute to Roth's writing and teaching, showing how we can integrate the wisdom of books into our lives and reminding us that creativity inspires the body as well as the soul.

I brought up Gabrielle Roth's second book, ***Sweat Your Prayers: Movement as Spiritual Practice***, in the last issue [of Caravan Trails]. It's a fabulous book and I encourage all of you to read it. In her first book, ***Maps to Ecstasy: Teachings of an Urban Shaman***, Gabrielle talks about five levels of consciousness, from the purely physical to the highest spiritual potential and (as I see it) the five stages of artistic development: inertia, imitation, intuition, imagination, inspiration. The first level is inertia, which is non-movement, having stuck energy, not getting anything done, being unconscious. The next level is imitation. We want something more in our lives and start moving. When we see someone or something that inspires us, that moves us, it gets us up and doing. But we can't stay in imitation. In order to grow, we continue to change and develop. The next layer is intuition—hearing our own voice, feeling our own thoughts, desiring our own style. And as we continue to express ourselves, we move into our own imagination, bringing together our spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental energies for spontaneous expression. When we transcend conscious effort, when we can live, dance, and create on the ecstatic level, we are touching our soul. We are living on the level of inspiration.

These ideas of consciousness can work on different levels of living, on the day-to-day life of just getting to work or dance class, to the overall picture of our life, career, goals, ect. I really can see these levels in myself as an artist and dancer. And as I watch my students develop, from their first class on, it's so wonderful to see each dancer develop into her/his own, as women (some men), as dancers. First, just to learn to dance, for whatever that personal reason is, then to let it act as a catalyst for empowerment, to let it drive through each of our own lives—daily, weekly, monthly. Remember when you were first learning to dance, watching your teacher, or the woman next to you, or viewing the advanced class. What were you thinking? Did you want to do that too? Be just like that woman? Wear costumes just like that? And you did. And you became stronger—physically, mentally—more aware of your body, your thoughts, your clothes. What else? Everything around you changed, I bet; maybe your friends, your romance, your job. Do these five levels make sense to you? Do you recognize them in your dance, in yourself?...

Paulette Reese-Denis, who has taught in Portland OR since 1991, writes that she has found her "soul dance" in tribal-style bellydance. She feels that dancers have a great deal to say about their dance, and plans to start a writers' workshop for her students. Check out her web page at www.iefx.com/gypsycaravan or email her at gypsycaravan@iefx.com.



*Books are meat and medicine
and flame and flight and flower
steel, stitch, cloud and clout,
and drumbeats on the air.—*

Gwendolyn Brooks

*Freeing the body inevitably
leads to freeing the heart.—*

Gabrielle Roth

*Your body is the ground
metaphor of your life, the
expression of your existence. It is
your Bible, your encyclopedia,
your life story*

—Gabrielle Roth.

*If you just set people in motion,
they'll heal themselves.*

—Gabrielle Roth

*Only when you truly inhabit
your body can you begin the
healing journey.*

—Gabrielle Roth

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.

Story Circles come in all shapes and sizes. Patricia Jones, of San Jose CA, attends a writer's workshop. "I don't know whether we could be called a Story Circle. Some of us write essays about our life experiences and others write poetry. I seem to lurch back and forth between the two, depending upon events in my life. We meet every other Monday to critique each others' works and most of us have been published. One is working on her master's degree in poetry and another has just sent a chapbook off for publication. We are all 'of an age,' preferring at this point in life to concentrate on just about anything rather than our annual birthdays!...We are from a variety of backgrounds and we come from everywhere: Oregon, Oklahoma, Arizona, Illinois, and Texas. Our stories are as diverse as our backgrounds."

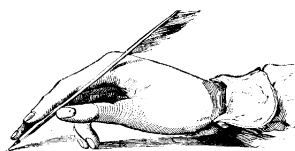
The wonderful thing about story circles is their informality and flexibility. Wherever women come together with the intention of sharing their stories—that's a story circle! Some circles simply write and share, while others write and critique the writing with the purpose of sharpening it for publication. And some circles may not focus on writing at all, but on something else. The following report is an example.

Lisa Hughes, of Milwaukee WI belongs to a quilting circle. "I just have to write and let you know that we have a story circle going in our church, but we don't call it a story circle.

It's a quilting circle. Every two weeks, about ten of us get together to work on a quilt we are making for our annual fund-raising raffle. While we work, we talk, and of course, we're sharing stories. In fact, I sometimes think that it's easier to share and tell when our hands are busy with needle and thread and our eyes are on our work. Somehow, we're less self-conscious, and we can share more easily. I'm always amazed at the stories that come out, and the closeness we experience as we spend this story-telling and quilt-making time together!



*In the OWL-Circle project, we use a quilting motif because it so beautifully describes the process of creating, telling, and sharing our stories. Quilts (particularly remembrance quilts) are made of fragments of the past, cut into new designs and sewn together with other fragments to create an entirely new (yet old!) design. Quilts teach us that nothing need ever be lost, and that even the most ordinary bit of something can be beautiful. It's a wonderful lesson to remember as we tell our stories. (And of course, you have seen the movie, *An American Quilt*, haven't you?)*



Dear Pen Partner...

Stories mean a great deal more when they're shared. If you'd like a pen partner to share stories with, please send us your name and address, and we'll run it in this space.

Sarah Elizabeth Durfor, 12300 Mustsang Chase, Austin TX 78727
Lynn Mills, 7323 S. Mooresville Rd, Indianapolis IN 46221

Life Writing for Publication

Publishing Your Writing on the Web

by Dayna Finet

In her fine resource book, *The Writer's Guide to the Internet*, Dawn Groves cites this translation of some anonymous author's letter of rejection from an also-anonymous Chinese journal:

We have read your manuscript with boundless delight. If we were to publish your paper, it would be impossible for us to publish any work of lower standard. And as it is unthinkable that in the next thousand years we shall see its equal, we are, to our regret, compelled to return your divine composition, and to beg you a thousand times to overlook our short sight and timidity.

The lesson: even for the most capable and determined of writers, getting published takes persistence and patience. *The next thousand years?*

In later columns, I'll provide you with information on the time-honored routes to publication for women life writers. I'll write about markets, agents, professional standards, even about grants that support the publication of women's biography, autobiography, memoirs, journals, diaries and letters.

This time, though, we're taking a shortcut . . . on the (infamous) "Information Superhighway," the Internet, the "Web." In short, I'll persuade you, I hope, to consider life writing online.

Does the mere idea of online publication seem even more overwhelming than the deepest imaginable publisher's "slush pile"? (That's where unread manuscripts wait for an editor's attention.) I think otherwise. Because online publishing can get your writing to readers faster, and bring you the satisfaction of seeing your words in print, I propose it as the very best place to start.

Life writing online has grown tremendously in the past several years. **Diarist.net** (more in a bit) tells us that the number of online journals has grown from just a dozen or so in 1995 to more than 800 today. And the quality of online life writing matters as much as its quantity. Sure, Web-slush happens—just as hard-copy-slush happens. But on the whole, online journals are usually open, spontaneous, fresh, and fun. Yes, some online journal writers can be snobby and cliquish. But for the most part, you will find no gatekeepers to online publication of your life writing. Write what you want, without rejection, without "no."

The Web offers two outstanding sites for women online life writers. The first, **Diarist.net** (<http://www.diarist.net>) calls itself the "comprehensive starting point for both writers and readers of online journals." It entices the novice online life writer with these advantages, plus more:

- ❖ people who can help you with the technical aspects of online publishing
- ❖ a list of host sites where you can publish your life writing even if you don't have your own website or much Internet experience
- ❖ a showcase for new online journals
- ❖ interviews with experienced online life writers
- ❖ discussion groups for online life writers
- ❖ a "start-up" section designed to help newcomers get their life writing on the Web

The second source is a "zine," or electronic magazine. It calls itself **Metajournals** (<http://www.metajournals.com>). The site features:

- ❖ a "diary of the day" and a "mystery diary"
- ❖ news and updates from the community of online life writers
- ❖ advice on decisions that online journalers need to make: "Do I need to learn HTML? (Maybe, maybe not.) Should I obtain my own domain name? (It depends.) How do I design an online journal? (There are many possibilities.)"

Both of these sites offer registries of currently active online life writing sites, operate surveys for online life writers, and link people interested in online life writing to other helpful websites.

Want to sample some online life writing? In addition to the sites above, Yahoo! and The Mining Company both list hundreds of online journals and diaries. At Yahoo! (<http://dir.yahoo.com>), follow the links from "social sciences" to "communications" to "writing" to "journals and diaries." The Mining Company (<http://journals.miningco.com/>) can connect you to its online life writing registry through a sequence of links from "arts/literature" to "writing/publishing" to "journals." Sample these, have fun, and return to this column next time for a primer on what you need to know to get started with online publishing.

Dayna Finet recently left her professorship at the University of Texas to work full-time as a writer and editor. She has published magazine features on the topic of life writing and profiles of interesting people's lives. She teaches life writing workshops and co-directs the OWL-Circle Project. She also serves on the board of the Story Circle Network. She lives in Austin TX.

Our Readers Share Their



Stories....

Paulette Rees-Denis of Portland OR writes “I dance through my life, integrating my art with my writing, my garden & home, my love—Jeff, my friends & family, with my dance, to surround myself with beauty. My life is a dance, and my chosen form is tribal bellydance. Through the dance I stsy connected to all these aspects of my life, my loves & desires, aches and frustrations, art and ornamentation, wisdom, spirituality, my livelihood, and a wonderful community of women and artists. I have been a performer almost all of my 41 years, using primarily dance to tell a story, but but I’ve also been exhibiting my photography/mixed media for 20 years, and making music with different types of musical groups.—*Look for more of Denis’s writing in “Books for the Journey.”*”

Denise Bell, who moves between **Georgetown TX** (in the winter) and **Flat Rock OH** in the summer, writes that the *Story Circle Journal* has reminded her of something important. “The *Story Circle Journals* have reawakened in me my desire & love of writing. I loved

to write when I was younger—during my junior high and high school years. It was when I was in nursing programs, first the licensed practical nurse, then college-level registered nurse classes, that I had to learn “charting,” which required writing short, to-the-point facts, that I lost the ability to write about my thoughts or feelilngs. Since I have begun reading the *Story Circle Journal*, I am learning once again how to express my thoughts, verbally as well as in writing. On the postcard you mailed me, you included a quote by Susan Griffin, “Each time I write, each time the authentic words break through, I am changed.” I too am changed with my writing!

Patricia Jones, of San Jose CA, tells us about herself. “In 1992, I completed a master’s degree in archaeology and each summer I go to Wyoming, where I dig at various sites. I also interview local Wyoming people in an attempt to take as many oral histories as possible for a small historical museum near Ft. Laramie. Since many of the people I interview are

older women and most of the women in my writer’s workshop are over 60 (I am 66) I was interested in reading about your OWL-Circle project...

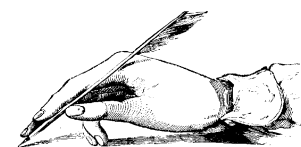
Lynn Mills, Indianapolis IN: I have always considered myself a wrter, although most of my writing is actually editing a small church-related women’s magazine. I am beginning to work with Susan Albert’s book, *Writing From Life* and am enjoying the self-discovery that happens along the way.

Susan Elizabeth Durfor, Austin TX sent two poems (look for one of them in “True Words from Real Women” and find her personal info in Pen Pals). She writes that her story is “everything all at once and spinning all the time. My age in physical years is 24, although I’ve found throughout the years how little number is actually worth. I’m constantly proving again and again that my body is but some organs and skin.”—*For Susan’s poem, “Love,” see True Words from Real Women—SA*

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FIRST CLASS



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!

Arkansas

Beverly Litzinger, Fayetteville
Catherine Crews, Dover

California

Duffie Bart, Monterey
Nancy Benbow, San Diego
Suzanne Crothers, San Andreas
Pat Browning, Hanford

Indiana

Barbara Bose, Speedway
Lynn Mills, Indianapolis

Kansas

Marie Scoville, Hillsboro

Louisiana

Jan K. Matamoros, Baton Rouge

Maryland

Tamara Zachakiw, Potomac

Massachusetts

Gail Anne Godio, Sandisfield

Montana

Jenna Caplette, Boseman

New Mexico

T.J. Reilley, Mesilla

New York

Pamela Priest, Webster
Jennifer Olson, New York

Ohio

Marlene Cintavy, Barberton
Helen Sadler, Macedonia

Oklahoma

Joyce Hogan

Pennsylvania

Lori Dafilou, Glenside
Carolyn Guss, Ardmore

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Barbara Peters, San Antonio

Amanda B. Childers, Friendswood
Martha D. Fleming, San Antonio
Sharon R. Zambrzycki, Austin
Dianne S. Meyer, Houston
Leanne N. Pitts, Gatesville
Alafair B. Kane, Houston
Penny Appleby, Austin
Leilani Rose, Austin
Nancy Tynan, Houston
Carla Jones, Marlin
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Pat Hall, Salt Lake City

Virginia

Martha Doss, Lexington

Wisconsin

Annette Howards, Madison

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page/add names to
May