



Story Circle Journal

The newsletter for women with stories to tell...

Volume 3 Number 4

With Courage and Common Sense: Memoirs From the Older Women's Legacy Circles

For the past year, the Story Circle Network has been offering free workshops for women sixty and older who live in the Austin TX area. Recently, we received a contract from the University of Texas Press to publish a book about the project, together with stories from the workshops. The book, the first in a series of memoir collections we hope to publish, will be edited by Dayna Finet, who writes this article.

How ironic that women trained to reticence would have so much to tell us! Schooled to serve husbands and families, some of these women believe their stories are not important. Formative years dominated by the Great Depression and World War II, they learned to endure difficulty with quiet courage and dignity.

Now under contract with the University of Texas Press, *With Courage and Common Sense* will help to preserve these women's stories, some of which link us back as far as their own grandparents' frontier youth. An edited selection of writings from the OWL-Circle Project, *With Courage and Common Sense* will be vital in preserving the recollections of private and public life in this century. We hope to follow with several other volumes of Texas women's memoirs.

Important not for their fame but for their formidability, participants in the OWL-Circles have written about experiences of depth and breadth that are astonishing even for Texas women. The OWL-Circle workshops have gathered memoirs from rural women who recall life without electricity and indoor plumbing, as well as women who have enthusiastically embraced every new technology. Homemakers abound, of course, but so do social workers and scientists, WACS and WAVES, and Holocaust survivors who came to Texas hoping to heal.

With Courage and Common Sense will open with an account of the OWL-Circle Project's beginnings and its continued evolution. In the first chapter, readers will re-experience the remarkable interpersonal dynamics of the OWL-Circle workshops, where older women discovered deep interest in, and support for, the telling of their lives' stories.

A series of eight to twelve topical chapters will follow. These chapters will correspond to workshop themes that ranged from very personal stories to stories linking women's lives to the climactic public events they witnessed. Within each of these chapters, readers will find six to eight memoirs, written by participants in the OWL-Circle workshops. Each writer's biography, historical and contemporary photographs, and each writer's signature will accompany her memoir.

A well-known Texas woman—yet to be identified—will write the book's preface. *With Courage and Common Sense* will be edited by OWL-Circle Project Co-Director Dayna Finet. Completion of the book's manuscript is expected in late 2000. *With Courage and Common Sense* should appear in 2001-2002.

As I grow into my fullest, most productive self, I need to always remember that I am telling my own story. I am the singer of my own song, the director of my own play, the author of myself. Rewriting our cultural and familial scripts is not easy, but it is the only way to become fully human, fully ourselves.—
Susan Wittig Albert

In This Issue

<i>With Courage and Common Sense</i>1
<i>The Story Circle Network</i>2
<i>Life Story Briefs</i>3
<i>The Journaling Page</i>4
<i>A Gathering of Women</i>5
<i>Writing and Healing</i>6
<i>New Beginnings</i>7
<i>True Words from Real Women</i>10
<i>New & Renewing Members and In the Works</i>12
<i>For Life-Writing Teachers</i>13
<i>A Story Circle News RoundUp</i>14
<i>Life-Writing for Publication</i>15
<i>Readers Share Their Stories</i>16
<i>Special Insert</i>17

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 in this newsletter. Please join us and share your story.

*You're on the Net?
So are we!*

Visit us and learn more about Story Circle
www.storycircle.org and www.owlcircle.org

Breast Cancer Survivor?

If you are a breast cancer survivor and would like to participate in a writing project designed to help survivors write about their experience, we'd like to hear from you! The Story Circle Network is planning to create a life-writing workbook and workshop specifically for breast cancer survivors, and we'd like to have your input. Write to Catherine Cogburn, Story Circle Network, 1501 W. Fifth Street #107, Austin TX 78703, or email her at ccogburn@io.com.



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!

LifeStory Briefs: Tips for Memoir Writers

The Millennium Memoir

It's almost here—that marvelous, magical millennium moment, when the clock chimes midnight and our wonderful world becomes another century older. It's a moment for memories, a moment to pause on the threshold of the future and look back across the past. Let's take some time to capture some of the experiences you'd most like to remember as you move forward into the twenty-first century. In a few pages of your notebook, let's create your Millennium Memoir—decade by decade.

The Decades of Your Life

Label a page for each decade of your life, from the birth to the present time. (If you were born in 1936, your first decade will be 1936-1946.) In three or four sentences, sketch out what you were doing during this decade. Where did you live? With whom? As you think about the decade, see if you can come up with a name for it. For example, a decade that included travel might be called "Explorations."

The Decade in Pictures

For each decade, find several photographs that picture you alone or with family and friends and put them in plastic photo sleeves that you can place in your notebook. Caption the photos with dates and brief descriptions. If some of the photos bring back special memories, take a few moments to write about that time. If you have other mementos of the decade—clippings, letters, wedding announcements, you might want to include them as well.

Reliving Each Decade

It's often easiest to remember and capture the past by making lists, then writing a few sentences about each thing on the list. Here are some ways you can use lists to relive each decade in your Millennium Memoir.

—Achievements

For each decade, list and briefly describe your most important and memorable

achievements: exciting things you accomplished alone or with family, friends, or co-workers.

—Surprises

Write down three or four of the biggest surprises of each decade. Why were these events surprising to you?

—Most memorable activities

What activities do you most remember from each decade? (I'll always remember the decade from 1970-1980 as the years I became a proficient sailor!)

—Favorite songs, movies, special events

Important times of our lives may be marked by shared memories of music (Guy Lombardo?) or an outstanding film (The Sting?) or a spectacular event (going to hear the Beatles?) Write down as many of these as you can remember for each decade.

—Disappointments

Life brings failure as well as success. Write briefly about the most memorable disappointments of each decade. What lessons did these teach you?

—Difficult Times

Each decade has its painful passages—days of grief and loss. What talents and strengths did you use to help you get through the hard times? On whom did you depend for help?

—Times of Joy

Each decade also brings its own unique and delightful pleasures. What were the best times of each decade? Why were these particular moments so special?

A Millennium Memoir is a precious document—a powerful aid to recalling your past and a wonderful means of taking you from one century to another. It won't take long to put it together, and you'll enjoy the memories it helps you to harvest!

THE MILLENNIUM RESOLUTIONS OF A LIFE-WRITER

For many of us, the new century may open a new chapter in our lives, if only because it brings us to a deeper awareness of the passing of time and the need to more fully understand our developing and changing stories. With this in mind, we'd like to suggest some important New Year's resolutions for life-writers.

I RESOLVE

—to journal as often and as regularly as I can, in order to capture both the daily experiences of my life as they occur and the feelings that accompany these events

—to create a Millennium Memoir that will help me describe and understand the important events of my past

—to take advantage of the publication opportunities offered by the Story Circle Journal to share my life-writing

—to gather my friends together and create a Story Circle, so that together we may experience the benefits of telling and sharing our stories

—to share with other women, as often as I can, the idea that our stories have value and significance and need to be told

—to consciously seek ways to celebrate my story and the stories of other women on every day of my life!



The Journaling Page . . .

. . . new beginnings . . .

by lisa shumicky

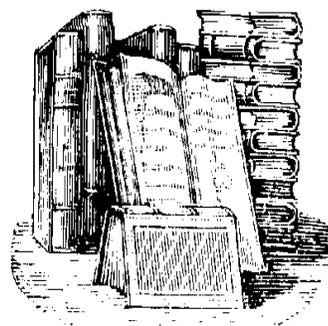
As the calendar flips through the end of this year, are you thinking of nothing but the Millennium or not thinking of it at all?

I have to admit that I'm in the second category ... but (of course!) I can always come up with something diary-related to say about any topic, including this one.

Have-you-seen-I-have-seen the special, guided, blank volumes designed to define who you are at century's end? One of them (at Waldenbooks) provides large pages simply topped with the prompt "My predictions for the Millennium..."

Amazon.com lists *The Millennium Journal: My Reflections on the End of One Era and the Beginning of Another*

as well as a "Millennium Edition" of Phillip Keel's now-classic fill-in-the-blank book *All About Me*. A reader at Amazon has a good idea: "I'm including my 'filled out' copy in the Millennium Time Capsule I'm making and purchasing a second copy to fill out the day I open the time capsule—that way I can see how all my answers have changed!"



Are you someone who discards/releases old columns of your journal? I never thought I would be but in the last four (or so) years of my approximately 30-year journal-writing career, I have become one. Is now the time for you to get completely free of the past and start with an absolutely clean white sheet of paper? As you consider this, you may want to read *Harvesting Your Journals*, by Rosalie Deer Heart [reviewed in the May 1999 issue of *SCJ*, vol 3 #2—*Ed.*]. One thing I like to do before "releasing" (a gentler term than discarding or throwing away my volumes) is to consider them in groups, as chapters in my life, and give each "chapter" a certain LOOK or name in my mind. It seems easier for me to let them go once I've defined them like that.

Are you going to at least START a new notebook on 1/1/00?

I am—even though I usually let the years run together and basically belong to the second group (as above) and think that 1/1/00 will be just another arbitrary day. (Though now I am also thinking of buying a Millennium Edition of *All About Me* and filling it out etc etc etc

Oh, so many words to write, so little time!



lisa shumicky is a writer/librarian who lives surrounded by heaps of journals in Islip Terrace NY

A Gathering of Women: A Weekend of Reverence, Reflection and Renewal *by Katherine Benbow*

Katherine Benbow, a member of the Story Circle board of directors, was one of the sixty-some women who participated in A Gathering of Women, co-sponsored by the Story Circle Network and the Isis Institute of Women's Studies, an Austin-based organization that encourages women's spiritual and psychological growth. The retreat was held the last weekend in October, at a retreat center in the Texas Hill Country. It was led by Joan Borysenko, best-selling author of Minding the Body, Mending the Mind, and Elizabeth Lawrence, creator of "The Inner Connection."

The weekend began with no structured agendas. Instead, Joan Borysenko and Elizabeth Lawrence listened and responded to the women attending the retreat and adjusted what they offered accordingly. This spontaneous receptive theme enriched our weekend.

The retreat was highly experiential, woven together with women's stories. Joan had worked in a confining, patriarchal world as director and co-founder of the Mind-Body Clinic at Harvard. She told of her departure to a new life created in response to her deeper inner callings. She joked about her "menopausal moments" and her open self-acceptance was refreshing.

Elizabeth's spiritual journey included being a Catholic nun, leaving her Order, marrying, raising her children, and then divorcing and recreating her life. Her healing energy and intuitive guidance was a powerful part of the weekend.

We journeyed from sacred Jewish, Christian, native American and Eastern rituals and prayer to irreverent jokes, uplifting songs, and into the spiritual movements of Chinese Quigong. In small groups, we witnessed and told our spiritual autobiographies to one another, taking turns in roles of talker, listener, and meditative container of the experiences. Each role contained a gift.

We made prayer flags from red cloth and sacred tobacco, enclosing our intentions and burdens, and then released them into fire and to our own version of Spirit. We explored using loving kindness to heal our selves, our families, and our world—being constantly reminded that true healing comes from community and the power of more than one, united.

In informal moments, we did what women do best and what Story Circle Network is about—we shared our stories. Synchronicities abounded, and surprised and delighted us. The women attending came from eight states, and were of many ages and backgrounds. The alchemy and acceptance of our differences was healing.

The retreat ended by pairing with one another, sharing what each of us were leaving and taking from our weekend, and how we were changing in the future. My partner was Joan. She too had used the retreat to reflect and renew. The giver gives, and in the process allows herself to be given to. Wholeness is the endless circle of balancing giving and receiving, and of navigating between the many roles we play.

I left, nourished by my weekend and joyfully singing what Joan called an ancient Buddhist hymn:

Row, row, row your boat.....

From an Internet interview with Joan Borysenko, entitled "Toward a New World View."

"We are living in an era of transpersonal psychology, where we recognize that in addition to one's own thoughts and one's own personal history affecting one's mind and body, in a certain sense we all affect each other through our thoughts. . . . Most of us have no trouble recognizing that our own thoughts affect our bodies. That's common knowledge now. What we don't know, or tend to forget, is that our minds can affect someone else's body and that their thoughts can affect our bodies. I think that when psychologists have the capability of being what we call "naturally therapeutic," it's partly because they look at their client with a mindset of great respect and love. Through that sense of respect, they bring forth healing. Eric Fromme said that parents ideally look at their child with an attitude of hopefulness. He defined hopefulness as a passion for the possible. When a therapist looks at a client with a passion for the possible and knows that there is indeed a Godseed within them that is going to grow, and knows that no person is flawed beyond the capacity to heal, and understands that every wound is a sacred wound in terms of being able to lead the person to a state of greater compassion and wisdom, that attitude alone crosses space and time and leads to healing."

Writing and Healing

Life Writing: A Tool to Discover Your Enchanted Self

In this regular column, we will be paying attention to the expanding body of knowledge about life writing as a way of improving our health. This column was written by Barbara Becker-Holstein, Ed.D., a psychologist in private practice in New Jersey and the originator of *The Enchanted Self*®. Her book, *The Enchanted Self: A Positive Therapy*, is available from your local bookstore, or on the Internet at Amazon.com. You might also want to check out Barbara's website, at www.enchantedself.com.

Your Enchanted Self

Here's an exercise to help you find the best of yourself in your past.

—What were some golden moments in your childhood when you felt particularly happy? Take some time to write them down, putting in as much detail as possible. List a favorite golden memory and really let yourself enjoy it. Close your eyes and see yourself at that age and experiment with letting your senses reconnect to that happy time. Can you remember what activity you were engaged in? Can you remember how your body felt? Were there any smells, particular weather conditions? How did things look around you? What did your mood feel like? Take some time to really recapture this happy memory of yourself.

—Now list the strengths, talents and interests that were either obvious or least suggested by this memory. Do you have any of these strengths, interests, or talents at this point in your life? If you do, perhaps it's time to reward yourself for holding on to some wondrous parts of you for so many years. If you don't, perhaps it's time to rekindle some of these lost parts of you.

—Take time to think about your lists as well as enjoy once again the wondrous child that you were and the magnificent adult that you now are.

I started life writing in the fifth grade. My mother bought me my own Girl Scout diary. Are you wondering what a Girl Scout diary is? It was the Girl Scout diary I kept. I had a minor learning disability, undiagnosed in those days, that resulted in odd spellings. Undaunted, I wrote to Dear Diary, sharing the best of *I Love Lucy*, visits with grandparents, and weekly meetings with the Girl Scouts. Then one day this diary was put away. Junior high, high school, and college were years when I took pen to hand on loose leaf papers. I kept details of my love life, shed many a secret tear, and wrote some of my finest, darkest poetry. Adult life found me writing on fragments of papers. These scraps contained everything from my children's cute expressions to my less dark poetry.

When I decided as a psychologist to interview women who were not in my practice, then incorporate my findings into a book, I never dreamed that my own life writings would play an essential part. I had interviewed women ages 35 through the early 80's, looking at the way messages they received about themselves growing up influenced them as adults. I asked them when they felt most whole, most joyful, most healed. In analyzing my data, I had an "Aha" moment. I saw that each woman, no matter how dysfunctional her childhood, no matter how many negative messages she had received growing up, had managed to find pleasure and joy in her adult life. This insight convinced me that we have not utilized the history-taking of our lives to focus enough on what is giving us pleasure and joy. We haven't learned to harvest the past to discover precious, healing moments even in the most dysfunctional of times. This included me.

In writing *The Enchanted Self: A Positive Therapy*, I began writing about my past and experiences again, but this time looking for precious treasure: the positive parts of myself and my life. In writing down my thoughts, feelings, and memories, I discovered many wonderful moments. I found myself remembering times when I felt delighted with life and full of energy, moments of elation and successes when my true and sometimes lost potential showed through. I discovered events that held many special gifts, even though they had felt unpleasant as I lived them. I began to hold and treasure these times as I wrote them down, feeling deeply moved, sometimes to the point of tears.

As I wrote and remembered, I discovered a distortion that I had carried about myself since early childhood, partly as a result of the definitions of feminine behavior when I was young. These definitions had included being pretty, compliant, unassuming and dutiful. Over the years I had been secretly ashamed of the traits I associated with being "masculine," such as leadership, courage, ambition, and persistence. Bringing together my years of experience as a psychologist and my understanding of the ramifications of society's biases, I was able to redesign myself in broader terms. I was able to sing the Song of My Soul (that is my term for getting close to one's true essence and purpose). The soul strength that I had been able to recapture after newly-discovering so many enchanting and authentic experiences, led me to be able to proudly say I have many facets: I am a listener, a teacher, a communicator, a student. I am a poet, and I am a holder of wide knowledge. I am a healer. I can come through!—*Barbara Becker-Holstein*

We're looking for contributors to this column, so if you have a special interest in the topic of life writing and wellness and would like to be a guest columnist, please write to Editor, Story Circle Journal, PO Drawer M, Bertram TX 78605, or email china@tstar.net.

Another Chapter in Your Story . . .

New Beginnings

*For the past 12 issues of The Story Circle Journal, Susan Wittig Albert has written about life-writing. Her articles have been similar to the chapters of her book **Writing From Life: Telling Your Soul's Story**, offering ideas and topics for your writing. If you've been doing the exercises she has suggested, you have been able to write 12 additional chapters of your life story. We hope you've enjoyed these articles. But it's time for a change. Beginning with our February 2000 issue, these pages will contain a series of interviews and features involving people who have made life-writing an essential part of their lives. Our first interview will be with Lisa Shumicky, who has been writing our Journaling Page for the last two years. We have several interviews and features lined up for future issues, but we'd appreciate very much any ideas and suggestions that you might have.*

A Few Millennial Thoughts

 It's been easy, these past few months, to slip into a reminiscent and reflective mood, looking back across life in the twentieth century and ahead into life in the twenty-first. In this issue of our *Journal*, you'll find suggestions for writing a "millennium memoir," some thoughts on millennium journaling, and some True Words from women who have been thinking about change, large and small, in their lives. On television, in magazines, and on the Web, we've seen and read millennial biographies, millennial histories, millennial triumphs and tragedies. World-wide, the approach of the change in our calendar that we call the "millennium" has encouraged us to think about what we have seen and experienced and to wonder what the future will bring.

Of course, a lot of the millennial circus is noisy hoopla designed to sell products, generate excitement, and distract us from the very important business of living our daily lives, ordinary moment to ordinary moment. But there is another, different sense in which the millennium symbolizes a moment of enormous significance in all of our lives: the moment of change, of beginning, of coming to a new place and a new state of mind. There have been several of these "millennium moments" in my life (and in yours too, I'm sure), each of them opening an important chapter of new vision, new experiences, and new hopes.

At the time, however, the millennial moment may have felt more like falling (or being pushed) off a cliff—a place where the world as I knew it seemed to end. A point at which the future was shrouded in mystery, darkness, confusion. A time when I had no idea where I was going and had no map or compass to take me there. Life-writing was one of the tools in my "change survival kit." It helped me to understand how I had reached the moment of change, and how I might survive and grow through the trauma of new beginnings.

New Beginnings

 If you'll turn the page and read our "True Words from Real Women," you'll see a wide variety of experiences of change, growth, emergence of spirit. One woman is leaving prison, another getting acquainted with a new baby, yet another passing an important birthday. Two women are coming to terms with new realizations about themselves and making new commitments to self and others, a third is exploring an adventure in coming of

*The moment of birth,
the beginning,
requires patience, implies
progress.
You are not alone.
— "Beginning"
Hexagram 3, *The I Ching**

*This life isn't bad—for
a first draft.
—Joan Konner*

*The secret of getting ahead
is getting started.
—Sally Berger*

*Supposing you have tried
and failed again and again.
You may have a fresh start
any moment you choose,
for this thing that we call
"failure" is not the falling
down, but the staying
down.—Mary Pickford*

It is the creative potential itself in human beings that is the image of God.—Mary Daly

What's ahead of me and what's behind me are nothing compared to what's inside me.
—Jean Shapiro

I have not ceased being fearful, but I have ceased to let fear control me...I have gone ahead despite the pounding in my heart that says: Turn back, turn back, you'll die if you venture too far.
—Erica Jong

It would be nice to travel if you knew where you were going and where you would live at the end—or do we ever know, do we ever live where we live? Or are we always in other places, lost, like sheep?—Janet Frame

Suppose it is not possible to be lost, and that feeling lost is simply an interpretation of how I do not know where I am. Suppose that you are right here where you are?
—Dianne Connelly

age. All of us, each of us, have experienced a wide variety of new beginnings in our lives.

Here's a brief exercise that will help you start thinking about your own new beginnings. On a clean sheet of paper (itself a new beginning!) jot down some of the important moments of change in your life. Here are some possibilities:

- ❖ leaving home
- ❖ getting married
- ❖ getting divorced
- ❖ losing a lover, a sister, a mother, a friend
- ❖ finding a new job
- ❖ leaving a career
- ❖ giving birth to a child

Make a list of about a dozen new beginnings in your life. Then choose one. Set a timer and write for five minutes, non-stop, about the experience—anything you can remember, all the detail you can recall. When you've finished, choose another item, set the timer, and write for another five minutes. Do this until you've completed your list (you don't have to do it all at one sitting, though.)

Saying Goodbye, Letting Go

As you wrote about these new beginnings, you may have reflected on how hard it was to leave the familiar and comfortable place where you were and move to something new, strange, uncertain. I recall a time in my own life when I abandoned a well-paid, tenured academic position to commit myself to the crazy business of becoming a full-time writer. Leaving the scene of my achievements was extraordinarily difficult. Letting go of that job security was agonizing. Saying goodbye to my identity as a successful English professor was the hardest thing I've ever done.

You've had similar difficult leave-takings. Let's turn our attention to the experience of letting go. Choose an event on your list and answer these questions:

- ❖ What did you leave behind in order to make a new start? (friends, loved ones, a place you enjoyed, an identity, security, comfort, excitement, hopes and dreams?)
- ❖ Was it easy or difficult to let go of the past? Was it a quick, impulsive move or something you agonized over for months or years? How did you feel during the experience? Did you feel that you knew where you were going, or did you feel lost, without direction, without a compass?
- ❖ How did others feel about your leave-taking? Were they supportive, discouraging, apprehensive, angry?

Write until you've remembered all there is to remember about your leave-taking. Then choose a different item from your list and repeat the process. When you've written on three or four topics, compare the experiences. Which leave-takings were the hardest, which the easiest? Why? Can you see any common patterns in the way you let go?

Saying Hello, Starting Over

Every experience of taking leave and letting go leads to something new, to a place of beginning, to a millennial moment. Or, to put it a different way, we can't begin something new until we have made room in our lives by letting go of something old. But starting over is often just as difficult as letting go. Saying hello to your new self, to a new place or a new way of life can be ex-

traordinarily challenging! Go back to the first item that you wrote about in the exercise just above and answer these questions:

- ❖ What was the biggest challenge in this new beginning? What new skills, way of thinking, state of mind were required of you? How much did you have to relearn? How quickly were you able to adapt?
- ❖ What important lessons did you learn ?
- ❖ Who were your most important teachers during this time of change? Who were your most valuable helpers? What did they do or say that helped the most?
- ❖ Did there come a time when this “new beginning” became an experience that you found it necessary to leave? (For example, did the exciting new job or the romantic new relationship come to an end?) If so, go back to the preceding set of questions and reflect on the process of letting go.

Most of us have experienced the full cycle of saying goodbye, saying hello, and saying goodbye again.. It is the process of growth and change, of return and renewal. Giving ourselves to the process requires courage and a commitment to being fully human. As we enter the new millennium, take some time to think and write about the chapters that have opened and closed in your life, about your own new beginnings, your adventures, your own millennial moments. Have a very happy New Year, and a marvelous, magical century!—*Susan Wittig Albert*

Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what's next or how. The moment you know how, you begin to die a little. The artist never entirely knows. We guess. We may be wrong, but we take leap after leap in the dark.
—*Agnes de Mille*

I wanted a perfect ending... Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity.—
Gilda Radner

This membership is a gift.
My name and address:

Please send me ____ free copies of the *Story Circle* brochure to share with family, friends, or 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*.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ - _____

Foreign memberships: International Postal Money Order only please

Mail to Story Circle Network, 1501 W. Fifth Street #107, Austin TX 78703



True Words from Real Women

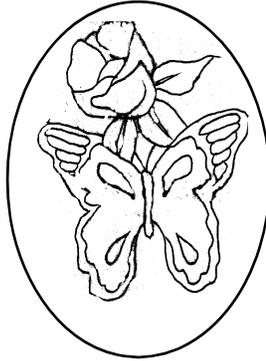
In this section of each Story Circle Journal, we publish your contributions of poetry and prose. Write for our Writers' Guidelines, limber up your ballpoint pen (or your typewriter or computer) and send in your contributions. We want to hear from you!

Leaving Prison

A world I've been away from nearly 15 years awaits me any day now. After rejecting me for nine years, they finally granted my parole.

Will I miss the snoring of women every night? Will I miss surviving hours without a drink of water? How about the orders barked at me by emotionally shut-down officers, or showering next to hostile strangers? Will I miss the shockingly frank confessions, the desperate trust, the whispered pleadings, the confounding moments of daily *deus ex machina*, the angst that bonds us, the purgatory-like morning walks of meditation, interrupted only by laughing Western kingbirds and the receding minor chords of truck tires on distant highways (*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall see God*), the same highway that brings news of unspeakable horror in high schools, of AIDS, of crack cocaine, of Internet addicts, of problems far more complex than those I left behind years ago?

No, I will drape my memories around me for protection and warmth as I step out. I will take my burnished soul and tears with me. This departure is not a new beginning, forever closing one book of my life's story—but the start of a new paragraph on the same page.



Annie
Gatesville TX
October 13, 1999

Annie, our hearts are with you as you begin this new paragraph. Thank you for the lovely drawing—and please, keep sharing your story! You are an inspiration to all of us!

As I begin to collect my thoughts, it is a spring day in the middle of April. The whole world is coming to life, and my second son, Owen, is one week old. I spend days and nights staring at him in wonder, trying to learn his cues—his own sign language. Is he hungry? cold? wet? I pick him up and his crying stops. Just for a moment, so does my heart. It is too full to continue.

He is hungry and I am ready for him. For us, breastfeeding is like a dance, each of us learning our steps, finding each other's rhythms. *One-two-three, one-two-three...are you ready? Are you rooting? You're a rootin'-tootin' cowboy from the Rio Grande. Open wide. Here I am. Breathe, relax, breathe, relax.* I watch his jaw move slowly, quickly, then

slowly again. When he is finished, he gazes at me with that drunken-sailor look. I too am drunk—drunk with love. I look into his eyes, watch him try to focus, arms and legs flailing. He is already trying to hold up his head. His eyes widen. *Tell me what you're thinking. Tell me a story, little boy.* I hear my husband coming home and realize with surprise that another day has flown by.

My older son Brendan, now the grand old age of four, tells me he wants to go on an "adventure." I try to coordinate the feeding, changing, gathering up of belongings, placing both my children oh so carefully into their new car seats. We're off to the library. When we make it home, our first trip tucked proudly under our belts, we're already planning for the next. My son is right. We are on an adventure, the beginning of our new lives together.

Erin Philbin Boyle
Pittsburgh PA

Fifty-Two

It's raining—
the drops on my skin feel like blessings
there are lots of them
mostly soft, but a few are stinging

like the events in my life

most were beautiful and good and soft
but a few were hard and tragic

I can't count the drops or the moments
nor do I want to

I'd rather have them wash over me and
cleanse me so
I'm fresh and new for the next rain

The rain is stopping and
soon the drops will dry

I see a rainbow
like the backdrop on my life.

Doris Anne Roop-Benner
Richardson TX

New Beginnings

New beginnings for me means being a healed and whole person. Four years ago, I suffered a mental breakdown called post-partum psychosis, which resulted in my going to prison for the death of my six-and-one-half week-old daughter.

New beginnings for me is realizing I never meant to hurt my child, that the real Kathy is loving and kind person.

New beginnings means living in absence of fear and a spiritual awakening to all my shortcomings—allowing my Higher Power to forgive me and helping me to forgive myself.

New beginnings means letting go of addictions of self-abuse, abusive relationships, and other self-destructive habits.

New beginnings means letting go of my past.

New beginnings means loving Kathy and becoming a beautiful, intelligent, caring, forgiving human being—here in prison and as a productive member of society once I am released from prison.

Katherine Dillon
Frontera CA

A New Beginning

The drinking binge on Christmas Day was a relapse. How had I fallen into this again? I had stopped several times before; I had the resources to stop: resolve, Antabuse, anti-depressants, extensive self-examination in therapy. What I didn't have was a reason to stop.

I had quit my job as a social worker, burned out by the demands of the very cases where I had done my best work. "You are so self-ish!" I railed at myself. "What are you going to do now? You don't have a clue, do you?" Drinking assuaged my guilt and smoothed the jagged edges of my anxiety.

At my husband's suggestion, I saw a therapist, privately doubting that another stint in therapy was going to make any difference. "Think back to when you were a little girl," she coaxed, "or in high school. What did you like to do?"

"Like to do?" I searched back through the years. I had trouble conjuring up anything I had really liked to do. It had been so long since I had wanted to do anything.

"Sometimes I sang," I mumbled feebly, "and I used to want to write. In high school I was layout editor of my yearbook."

"I want you to go home, pull out some pictures, spread them out on your dining room table. *Play* with them. See what happens."

"Sure," I thought skeptically. "For this I'm paying a therapist?" But I did what she asked.

From that deceptively simple suggestion I began my journey into a new life of joy. Photo layouts rekindled my love for photography and sparked a new interest in the world of computer enhancement. I began exploring dusty boxes of family photographs. I began writing stories about growing up. I began voice lessons and joined a group based on Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*. The process of rediscovering my own authentic voice was profoundly empowering.

Now, instead of doing what I was taught I "should" do, I do what I love—pursuing my passions.

Judy Fettman
Ann Arbor MI

Freedom on Four Wheels

When I was eighteen years old, freedom to me was a blue Dodge Dart. This was my first car. I don't know what model year it was, but I do know it was old and I couldn't have cared less! I was eighteen also when I finally got my drivers license. I had graduated from high school and was working as a pharmacy clerk. Since my parents couldn't chauffeur me to and fro, I guess they realized it was time I became more independent. Thank the Lord! I must have been the only teenager in town who didn't drive, much less have a car to drive.

I remember the first time I drove it. It was a very physical experience, because it was a heavy car which didn't have power brakes or steering, and it took all of my hundred-and-ten-pound strength to maneuver it. It was a good thing I lived in the country because as I came to the end of the road I lived on, I literally lifted myself off the seat while pressing the brake to stop the car! Turning onto the highway was a revelation—I had muscles I never knew existed. No matter. As I drove down Highway 25 in my very own car, I felt a sense of freedom and independence I had never felt before. Just driving to and from work every day was a complete joy. I had an eight-track tape deck and loved to drive around town while Fleetwood Mac or the Doobie Brothers kept me company. Oh, how I loved my car!

I also learned a lesson in finance and budgeting because I paid for the car myself, making regular monthly payments to the bank. It made my possession all the more meaningful to know I was totally responsible for payment and maintenance of this car, just like a real adult. I learned to compare gas prices and pump my own gas. Various repairs had to be made along the way, such as a new air filter and new set of brakes. I learned how to check the oil and water and why I had to check the oil and water. It was quite an education.

One summer Sunday afternoon, the unthinkable happened. I had an accident, and the driver's door was smashed in. My perfect car was no longer perfect. But I could still drive it and shortly thereafter it was repaired and repainted and good as new.

I'll always remember that summer of 1975 as the summer I took my first step to independence. I'll also remember the hard lesson of tempering independence and enthusiasm with restraint. The next year I had another accident and my beloved Dart couldn't be repaired. Although I no longer had a car, I did still have car payments! Independence also calls for responsibility for your actions—a lesson I learned the hard way!

Charlotte Hamrick
New Orleans LA

Looking Ahead

Each issue of the *SCJ* is loosely organized around a particular theme. We urge you to submit your stories on these topics:

February, 2000—Simple Pleasures (deadline 1/15/00)

May, 2000—Grandmothers (deadline 4/15/00)

August, 2000—Teachers & Wise Women (deadline 7/15/00)

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 June, 1999. We're glad to be a part of your story—and hope that you'll become an active part of ours!

Arizona

Jil-Christi Tatar, Tempe

California

Janet Grant, Fremont

Duffie Bart, Monterey

Mary Nosker, Ridgecrest

Colorado

Joan Borysenko, Boulder

Dulany Woodward, Buena Vista

Connecticut

Nora Jamieson, Collinsville

Indiana

Judy Hansen, Danville

Robin Clamme, Hartford City

Lynn Mills, Indianapolis

Gale Kvam, W. Lafayette

Sandra McKinzie, W. Lafayette

Illinois

Edwina Finet, Monticello

Louisiana

Charlotte Hamrick, New Orleans

Jo Anna Jones, Montegut

Maryland

Elizabeth Lawrence

Massachusetts

Karen Cooley, Sandisfield

New Jersey

Louise Thigpen, Vineland

New Mexico

T.J. Reilley, Misilla

Oklahoma

Sheryl Riggs, Broken Arrow

Carolyn Faseler, Norman

Cathie Lee, Norman

Oregon

Paulette Reese-Denis, Portland

Annette Wager, Tualatin

Pennsylvania

Linda Wisniewski, Doylestown

Florence Carretta, Pittsburgh

South Carolina

Mary K. Hench, Charleston

Texas

Penny Appleby, Austin

Carol Bilich, Austin

Carolyn Cook, Austin

Sarah Durfor, Austin

Molly Ficken, Austin

Marsha Fowler, Austin

Karol Kaye Harris, Austin

Judith Helburn, Austin

N. Hendricks, Austin

Linda Jones, Austin

Barbara Kelley, Austin

Ann Kriss, Austin

Leilani Rose, Austin

M. Jane Ross, Austin

Mary Ellen Simms, Austin

Susan D. Stayton, Austin

Bonnie Watkins, Austin

Gwen W. Wells, Austin

Jean M. Wyllys, Austin

Mary S. Weiler, Brookshire

Jane Purtle, Bullard

Jackie Lane, Dallas

Heather Young, Dallas

Amanda Childers, Friendswood

Judy Barrett, Georgetown

Linda Watkins, Georgetown

Alexis Eager, Marlin

Leila Jordan, Port Arthur

Jody Kelly, Round Rock

Bernice Speer, Round Rock

Pam Wolfe, Round Rock

Barbara Peters, San Antonio

Sara Lundy, Sunrise Beach

Betty Smith, West Columbia

Virginia

Mary Faith Pankin, Arlington

In the Works.....

The Internet Chapter

In the last issue of the *Journal*, we told you that our Board of Directors is moving toward the establishment of an Internet Chapter of the Story Circle Network. A few weeks ago, we took a big step in that direction. Peggy Moody, a Board member and also our webmistress, moved our website to a new host that has the resources to permit the development of a variety of new activities. Among the possibilities are a message board, a chat room, live chats with authors, an on-line magazine, workshops, private critique groups, member profiles, an Ask A Pro section (agents/editors respond to questions), and information about courses, seminars, and workshops around the country. With an on-line chapter, we will be able to create a community of caring women, publishing their work on the Web and creating a forum for sharing experiences, ideas, and opportunities. If you're interested in helping us shape the chapter, please contact pmoody@pobox.com.

National E-letter

Story Circle members who are on-line are invited to join the mailing list for our new national email newsletter. We'll be sending the first issue during the first week of January, and monthly after that. To receive the newsletter, go to our website,

www.storycircle.org, and click on the ListBot button at the bottom of the page. You'll be asked to confirm your subscription—and we'll do the rest.

On-line Classes Being Planned

Beginning in January, we hope to offer at least one experimental class by email. In a six-week session, the instructor and students will exchange assignments, comments, and critiques. The cost of tuition has not yet been established, and class size will be strictly limited. Susan Albert plans to offer a course based on her book *Writing From Life*, and other instructors are being sought for courses in the memoir, the personal essay, journaling, and poetry. If you are interested in signing up for a class or would like to teach one, send email to china@tstar.net

Life-Writing Competition

Watch the next issue of the *Story Circle Journal* for the announcement of the first in a series of juried life-writing competitions, open only to members of the Story Circle Network. The competition will be juried by published writers and prizes awarded to winning authors.

For Life Writing Teachers....

No Small Thing

by Dianne S. Lodge-Peters, Evergreen AL

In writing groups small or large, through reticence or sheer numbers, women's voices are not always heard, even by other women. Our voices have been so stifled for so many hundreds of years that when they are heard, the sound is a rare surprise. It is no small thing, then, for women's voices to be listened to actively. One way to release the sound of women's voices in a writing group is to emulate *popcorn*, as poet Judi Beach of Sedgewick ME does in her writing workshops.

Imagine a roomful of women of all ages, sizes, colors, stripes, plaids, and polka-dots. Imagine each one having written a paragraph or two to a prompt. ("Write about your biggest disappointment." "Write about the happiest day of your life.") How can all their words be shared? How can they be heard?

First, arrange the larger group into smaller groups of three or four. Then, simultaneously in all the smaller groups, ask each writer in turn to read her words aloud to others in her group. As she reads, her listeners jot down those words or phrases that feel charged with energy. Next, ask the women in the entire larger group to speak aloud those words of energy they have heard. "Blurt them out," says Judi Beach. "Don't raise your hand to be recognized. Just speak. Speak up. Speak out. Like *popcorn*."

Now. Imagine scattering yellow kernels of dried corn across a flattish-bottomed pot. Apply heat and listen. Silence at first, enough perhaps for a short wish or meditation. Then a tiny explosion. Another. Several others. A flurry of rat-a-tat-tats, and the smell of August heat in fields of golden

grasses. Memories of sweat-washed bodies, tanned and ripe, dusted with motes of red clay rising from dirt paths, or beach sand sticking to salty-tasting skin. More cracklings. An army of artillery cannonading too many explosions simultaneously to hear any pop individually. And yet the army marches to its own cadence. It laughs.

Have you ever listened to the sound of women's laughter? A giggle or two to punctuate, offer an apology, earn an elbow's nudge. A deep-throated chortle or bleats from bellies, guffaws and brays that bring on more giggles and chuckles. The sound can rattle windows, release pain, spawn hugs. The laughter fades. Pops become individual.

In this small way is one small thing made large. Women's voices are heard in a gathering of one-by-ones. Large numbers are made small, reticence overcome. Laughter explodes in a plural made of singulars—like *popcorn*.



We're looking for additional contributors to this column. If you teach classes or workshops in life-writing and would like to share your ideas and suggestions for exercises, writing topics, or other teaching-related activities, please send us your contribution (450-550 words).

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

Jill Ker Conway

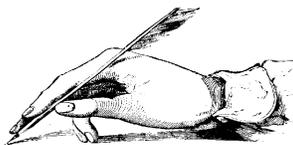
I want to write about the great and powerful thing that listening is...a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas begin to grow within us and come to life...and it is this creative fountain inside us that begins to spring and cast up new thoughts and unexpected laughter and wisdom. That is why, when someone has listened to you, you go home rested and lighthearted.—Brenda Ueland

To listen. Such a small word, so ordinary. And yet, not to be listened to, not to be heard, is not to exist. So in the Story Circle, we listen one another into existence, into true life. We listen in suffering and in celebration, putting ourselves out of the way, and let others know that we have heard.—

Susan Wittig Albert

Write it down, girl. Tell everyone how much it hurts. Sharing will make it easier to bear.

—Terri L. Jewell



Dear Pen Partner...

Stories mean a great deal more when they're shared. If you'd like a pen partner, send us your name and address, or write to one of these Story Circle members:

Doris Anne Roop-Benner, 2206 Sutton Place, Richardson TX 75080-2543, email Darbey@worldnet.att.net

Dorothy Longwell, Box 468, Bertram TX 78605, email ChuckRL@compuserve.com

Sue Brungs, 1415 Devil's Backbone Rd, Cincinnati OH 45233, email sbrungs@unidial.com

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

As we hope you know, the Story Circle Network has received a grant to create a series of free memoir-writing workshops for women over sixty in the Austin TX area. We are now entering the final year of this multi-year project, which is called the Older Women's Legacy Circle Project. The project's co-directors have written and revised the project workbook, created a facilitator's manual, offered over thirty workshops, and received a book contract (see Dayna Finet's story on page 1). But of all these accomplishments, two very special activities stand out for us. We'd like to share them with you here, as testimony to the loving power of story-telling.

Daisy Stanley, one of our Story Circle members and an intern at a local nursing home, has started an OWL-Circle group for women who are in the early stages of Alzheimer's. Daisy recently wrote about this rewarding experience.

"I am facilitating a wonderful group of folks, using the OWL-Circle methods and ideas to help my group tell and write the stories of their lives. (Of course, I've had to do a bit of modification: with Alzheimer's sufferers it is important to be very flexible.

"At our most recent meeting, we talked and wrote about Thanksgiving. I brought a basket of scented pine cones and a cinnamon candle. My partner from the Alzheimer's Association brought pumpkin bread. We feel that sensory queues can be helpful in stimulating memory.

"I always create an 'assignment' page for us to write on. The page asks for a list of specific items, or asks a simple question. This time, we listed our favorite foods for Thanksgiving. I also asked if they had eaten any unusual foods (as an example, I mentioned a Thanksgiving when I had lasagna). In addition to the list, the writer is asked to describe a favorite Thanksgiving.

"I have learned not to use the concept of story-telling, as my group confuses stories with fiction. Instead, I ask for memories, always asking that we write the 'when, what, who, and how.' (Sometimes I ask 'why,' and get some interesting results.) Questions such as these help my group remember the stories they have to tell. The present may be foggy for them, but the past is very clear.

"I also bring a sheet for everyone to take home, asking them to make a list, answer a question, and write down a memory. I haven't had too much luck with this yet, but my group truly wants to do more. I will need to get the caregivers involved.

"I have found that the sheets printed in a large font work best. The question is written, the list items are numbered, and the directions are clearly given. The sheets seem to work better for some, while others remember to bring the notebook I gave them at our first meeting.

"Writing and reading are difficult for this group. Stories are pieced together from what is written and what is told. To use the quilting metaphor of the OWL-Circle workbook, with this group we are collecting the bits and pieces which in turn will become a quilt block. The group is truly a joy to work with. In being with them, I am more convinced than ever of the value of the stories these people have lived and hope to retrieve some of the stories that might otherwise be lost due to their disease."

Susan Albert writes—

On September 15, in Temple TX, a very special member of the Story Circle Network gathered a dozen of her friends in her home for the first of the five-session OWL-Circle workshops.

Carol Landherr convened that exciting session, and the OWL Project had been close to her heart since the earliest days of its creation. For months, she had been talking about having the workshops at her house, about the joy of sharing stories with friends, about the importance of life-writing in her own life. Long before that, though, Carol had known the joy of journaling, the special wisdom that often comes as we explore our stories, and the excitement of discovering new mysteries within our own lives. She had shared much of that joy, those excitements, that wisdom with me, for we had been in many classes and groups together over the last dozen years.

Carol's own story is one of great personal achievement, as a mother, a civic leader, a fund-raiser, a textile artist and teacher, a performer, and the director of alumni for a large medical center. Her story is also one of great personal discovery, for she explored as far as she could the mysteries of her own heart. Her interest in and commitment to the OWL-Circle Project was part of that exploration, and she wanted her friends to participate in it with her. Our evening together (I was privileged to facilitate the group) was full of delicious laughter, shared stories, love and warmth.

But the workshops that Carol dreamed of have been postponed and will have to be carried on without her. For the past few years, she had been living through the late stages of breast cancer. The day after our first session, she was hospitalized. A few days later, she was gone.

All those who knew Carol miss her deeply: her joyful energies, her cheerful optimism, her boundless delight in life. But we are richer—much richer—for knowing her story, and for her presence in our own stories. She will always be a part of us.

If you would like to become an OWL-Circle Associate and offer memoir workshops for senior women in your community, please request information from Catherine Cogburn, OWL-Circle Project Co-Director, 1501 Fifth Street #107, Austin TX 78703, or email storyo@io.com.

Life Writing for Publication

Writing a Query Letter

by Dayna Finet

You're pondering your magnum opus, the story of your life, your memoir...and you want to publish. Now comes the hard part. You have to write a query letter.

My last column convinced you, I hope, of the importance of literary agents in the author-to-reader publication chain. Once you've done the research to find the agent most likely to enthusiastically represent your writing, you need to convince him or her of its merit. Because memoirs dwell in the realm of nonfiction, you'll almost certainly sell the book before you actually write it. (This fact surprises many first-time nonfiction authors, and delights not a small number of them.) Rather than a full manuscript, your agent will present to potential publishers a book proposal (which you, not your agent, will write...more in a later column) outlining your book, giving a sample chapter from it, summarizing your credentials, and presenting your market research to demonstrate the book's salability. On the quality of the proposal depends your chance for publication and a reasonable, if not generous, advance.

However.

Few agents will bother to open your book proposal unless they've already agreed to read it. To request this favor, you need to write a query letter.

Perhaps best summarized as a miniature version of the longer (40-60 pages or so) book proposal, the query letter announces your book proposal in the most compelling way possible and asks the agent if she would like to receive it. Consider that agents say yes to about 10% of query letters (an optimistic estimate), and you'll realize how important is this little piece of persuasion.

According to literary agent Elizabeth Lyon (*Nonfiction Book Proposals Anyone Can Write*), a good query letter includes three chief elements--the lead, the body, and the conclusion. The lead should generate excitement about your book. The body of the query letter should clearly but concisely describe your book, its market and its competition, and your relevant credentials as author. If you have an outline or table of contents for your book, you should include this as an enclosure. Lyon likens a query letter's conclusion to a handshake, thanking the agent and asking for a timely (and of course, favorable) response (in the form of a request to see your full proposal).

Some details of query letter strategy are matters of taste and/or opinion:

- ◇ You can try a clever lead paragraph, or write a more straightforward statement about your book and its purpose. If uncertain about possible misinterpretation, I'd recommend a more direct lead.
- ◇ Most publishing insiders suggest that query letters not exceed one page, while others permit some exceptions--still two pages, maximum. You should write a longer letter only if it's impossible to condense your query into less space.
- ◇ Describe your qualifications with confidence, but without

egotism. Here, you should be concise, presenting only those credentials and experiences that directly reveal your fitness to produce the book you propose. Include your credentials in the form of *relevant* enclosures--author bio and clips (if you're previously published), resume, or letter of endorsement from recognized authorities.

And there are a few practically inviolable rules:

- ◇ Use a formal, business-standard form of address even if you've met the agent or received a referral (both of which you can mention in the letter). Correctly spell the agent's name, and the agency's. Make sure the address is correct.
- ◇ Present your writing (and your self) positively, but without the extremes of arrogance/overconfidence or premeditated defensiveness.
- ◇ Do not mention fees.
- ◇ Proofread and proofread and proofread again. Make absolutely sure of names, titles, and any facts you include in the letter. Do *not* rely on your spelling/grammar-checker. The query letter reveals your professionalism. It is an appropriate place to obsess over details.
- ◇ Include the expected "SASE" (self-addressed stamped envelope) for the agent's response. Also include other contact information, such as your daytime phone, fax, and/or e-mail. If you have a business card, it can conveniently provide this information.

If you want to read some sample query letters, edited with commentary, try John Wood's *How To Write Attention-Grabbing Query and Cover Letters* (1996, Writer's Digest Books)

Dayna Finet is a free-lance writer and editor with a special interest in memoir and life writing. She is a member of the Story Circle Board of Director, co-director of the Owl Circle Project, and editor of With Courage and Common Sense: Memoirs from the Older Women's Legacy Circles.

Visit us on the Internet
at
www.storycircle.org
www.owlcircle.org

Our Readers Share Their Stories...



Bonnie Watkins, of Austin TX, writes, "The women in my father's family treasured words and nurturing. I also rejoin in shared creation—God spoke and it was; I can create love and life with my words. Language is a gift I pass on to my husband, my sons, my students, my friends."

Carolyn Blankenship, of Austin TX, speaks for many of us when she says, "I was born into the world blessed and knowing I was blessed. Somehow I forgot that I was blessed, but spent years trying to be a blessing to others. Now I know I am blessed to be a blessing, and that the Mystery does its dance through us all."

Dorothy Longwell, of Bertram TX, shares this with us: "I was born a Yankee, Long Island, to be exact. I was raised in bustling city life and nurtured in the country. Now, I travel to family and friends stretched from shore to shore."

Doris Anne Roop-Benner, of Richardson TX, was told by her grandmother that she had "the gift of gab." Doris wants to use this gift to tell women's stories: "I was born and raised in Philadelphia, PA, and moved with my husband and three daughters to Richardson, TX, in 1973. In 1994, when I celebrated my fiftieth birthday, I decided to stop being whatever the people around me wanted, needed, and expected me to be

be. And who did I become? A writer, student, golfer, reader, genealogist, sports fanatic, cook, piano player, dancer, and yoga practitioner—Everything Woman. My writings, starting with my life story, reflect my desire to make known the incredible contributions that all the 'everything women' have made throughout history."

Carolyn Cook, another new member from Austin TX, tells us: "My story changed drastically last year when my partner died. The process of rescripting my story through grief work has been an interesting challenge. My story will continue to include the family and friends whose love has sustained me with support and caring."—*Thank you, Carolyn, for reminding us that our stories are often shadowed by loss, and that sharing our grief with others whose stories are similarly shadowed may help us to pass through the dark time.*

Sue Brungs, Cincinnati OH is "a mother of three who loves animals, enjoys gardening, would like to learn to write interesting stories. My husband and I operate a small retail garden center." [Don't let her fool you—it may be small, but it's beautiful! I've been there, and I know.—*Ed.*] "I also love to quilt and design my own using some personal ideas to make the pro-

ject special. I enjoy making miniature gardens complete with dolls, and putting together scrapbooks."

Betty Smith, of West Columbia TX, writes: "I am retired but stay busy with housework, yardwork, and cooking plus drawing and oil painting. My sister and I seek out antiques on frequent outings. I correspond with many people and am currently writing a book."

Two members suggest good books to read. **Duffie Bart**, of Monterey CA, recommends *Divided Lives*, by journalist Elsa Walsh, "an excellent book about the private lives and public careers of three exceptional women," Duffie says. "Their conflicts are typical of us all" The other book is called *I Could Tell You Stories*, by Patricia Hempl. **Charlotte Hamrick**, New Orleans LA, recommends *Cultivating Space* by Elizabeth Murry ("a truly joyous book filled with reverence for nature") and *A Woman's Book of Life*, by Joan Borysenko ("A book I will return to again and again for guidance.")



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