

Chrysalis 2014

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The original, complete first issue of Chrysalis was lost, and not all documents could be retrieved in their originally published state. The Letter from the Editor was one of those documents.

The first Letter I wrote came after tremendous effort and toil, spending over one hundred hours of work learning to create and run a literary journal from scratch with no mentor. It was a messy process full of stabs in the dark, mistakes, corrections, and good guesses. I didn't have a team; I had a handful of volunteers, mostly close personal friends of mine, who would pop in and help a little and then pop out again. I had to chase many a reviewer and many an author down for comments, for final copies, for proof of real revision. Yes, it was messy. But it felt good to be apart of. I had not yet learned to become a clear, concise, confident leader of the journal. I would by the end of my run with Chrysalis in 2017.

The first Letter I wrote contained talk about the theme, the writing, and had detailed summaries of the contents. This letter will not. I urge you to read each article and let it reveal to you what it can about TLA and how it touches lives. The goal of the journal has always been to expand our understanding of the transformative power of the language arts to impact people and their communities, the many and varied ways people use language to create lasting and real positive change.

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THEORY

**To Make a Prairie: Founding
Transformative Language Arts**

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,

One clover, and a bee.

And revery.

The revery alone will do,

If bees are few

~ Emily Dickinson (710)

To Make a Prairie

It's no coincidence that I live in the middle of a big field, and have been helping a new academic field emerge since 2000. The grassy field we live in is slowly transitioning from a brome hay field into a prairie by conscious intent, awareness and surprises inherent in its potential, and I very much feel that TLA as an emerging field is following many of the same dynamics. Just as the soils, climate and suppressed native plants were all there and flourished when given the opportunity provided by a change in managing the field, all of the elements of TLA as a field were already

present, ready to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the decision to develop the concept of Transformative Language Arts. As one of our TLA alumni Patricia Fontaine once told me, I turned out to be the right vessel at the right time. I simply did what I felt like I had to do without always understanding it, driven by instinct, and guided by lessons learned in discussion, discernment, and trial and error with Goddard College students, staff and faculty, and people practicing TLA in the community.

One of my favorite poets, W.S. Merwin, writes in his poem “The Gift” how “I must be led by what was given to me” and then compares this process to what the earth is constantly doing also: leaving itself in streams, “braiding flights of birds,” and one of the most potent examples, “the learnings of plants.” As living beings, we are attuned to follow the light, metabolize all that is given to us into our lives, and from all of it, learn.

This is my story of my education about Transformative Language Arts (TLA), and how I see it emerging into its own field. Whether I'm dwelling in the middle of the field where I live—an old crop field planted back to brome and now transitioning back to its roots as part of the tallgrass prairie in Northeast Kansas—or in the middle of the vibrant field of TLA—I'm trying to be led by what's given to me.

Roots of TLA in My Life

It started with a writing workshop. Propelled by my experience of writing saving my life as a teen, and bolstered by filling journals and writing manuscripts since that time, I decided to offer a community workshop on writing and healing. I was thirty two, in the middle of graduate school in English, and had recently given birth to my second child. My future, as I had planned out in great detail at the time, included finishing my doctorate, hanging out with my kids, and making enough of a living through my day job adjunct-teaching at the University of Kansas, plus some other work (such as community writing workshops) to have time for my own writing.

The six-week writing workshop, held in a stone-walled room above a coffee shop called Pywacket's, immediately set into motion changes to my plans and life. The people who came weren't, as I thought they might be, hesitant to jump into painful topics. Instead, they wanted most of all to write about hard stuff in their lives—job loss, divorce, chronic illness, damaged children or relationship—to unearth meaning and free up energy. We wrote and cried, shared stories around the edges of the writing, and talked at length about ways to interpret the meaning of our experiences.

Led by the people who came to my workshops, I started developing ways to facilitate such sessions. While I had been writing and reading most of life, I was far more prepared for this work from my years as a community organizer. For most of my life, up until I developed TLA, I felt

pulled into two directions: writing and organizing. I had always felt the call of our broken world, enough that I immersed myself in social change groups from my teens onward, eventually landing in the bioregional movement, where I found a way of understanding the world based in place and community.

Bioregionalism is about learning to live sustainably and respectfully with our ecosystem, and the movement, which emerged in the 1970s and 80s, and according to the Kansas Area Watershed Council's website, "...acts as a catalyst for social and political change, focusing on decentralization, strengthening local economies and culture, and preserving and enriching the natural systems of water, air and land in ways that foster sustainability." The gatherings I've attended and helped organize since 1982 with my local bioregional group, the Kansas Area Watershed Council, and the Continental Bioregional Congress, are based on the premise that together we create a ceremonial village, a model of how to live in community and eco-community. To help us live together with peace and justice, we've adopted and adapted Quaker traditions of consensus-based meetings and communal discernment. During thirty-plus years in the movement, I've experienced many intensive lessons in how communities can draw on a strong group process to navigate gender, race, religious and spiritual, disability, class and other divides, and most of all, how we can learn to listen deeply to each other and to the living earth.

Prior to starting graduate school, I also learned about how

organizations function through five years of work as a community organizer with labor unions, environmental organizations, and social service agencies in Kansas City, MO and Lawrence, KS. I worked with various non-profit organizations, first with labor unions on energy and conservation issues, and later as coordinator for a coalition of sixty social service and community groups (I trained at the Midwest Academy, “a national training institute committed to advancing the struggle for social, economic, and racial justice). All of my hands-on education, whether through organizing campaigns, brainstorming tactics to move ahead social issues, or sustaining strong and inclusive grassroots organizations, speaks to the importance of including and listening to many voices.

Most of what I learned during those years came from Thea Nietfeld, a community organizer in Kansas City who I worked with at the Citizen/Labor Energy Coalition. Thea taught me by example about listening closely to people, whether they were supporting or opposing our group. Caroline Estes, one of the foremost teachers of the Quaker traditions of consensus, and later, Bea Briggs, founder of the International Foundation for Facilitation and Change, facilitated meetings at bioregional congresses for two hundred to three hundred people with grace and an inclusive spirit, reminding us that we all hold a piece of our overall wisdom.

When I started facilitating community writing workshops, I was led by my yearnings for art and justice, writing and community as well as the years and moments that taught me about the importance of creating and

holding as safe a space as possible for people to make and keep community. Years later, I would meet people who created models for community writing workshops, but when I started, I didn't yet have a notion of how widespread this work was, only that it seemed like what I should develop over time. My grassroots organizing training, plus some years freelancing as a journalist and attending journalism school, also gave me a background in publicizing my workshops.

Within three years of my first workshop, my plan to teach part-time indefinitely morphed into a better opportunity than I could have anticipated: a full-time teaching job as a professor at Haskell Indians Nations University, the only inter-tribal university, located in Lawrence. I found a lovely Japanese woman to watch my newborn son during the day while I worked full-time (Haskell required professors to be on campus forty hours/week), did an occasional writing workshop, and dreamt of my own poetry when I didn't have time to write. I pumped breast milk in my office between classes, graded papers while the baby slept on me, and committed to what my life would now be for the next thirty or so years.

Six months later, my Haskell job dissolved beneath my feet, sending me into a tailspin. For two weeks, I hardly slept, and wondered what I would do now, having given up my adjunct position at K.U. Then a friend called me with some news: Goddard College, where she taught, was hiring faculty for its BA and MA individualized program. Teaching at Goddard would mean going to Vermont twice a year for ten days of faculty meetings

and a residency, but it would also mean working with students deeply on interdisciplinary, self-designed studies. Since 1996, I've been flying twice a year to teach at Goddard, where students design their own curriculum, choose their own faculty mentor to work with one-on-one for a semester's worth of credit, and focus their studies on growing their scholarship, whole selves, and contribution to their communities.

The Goddard work was part-time, our three kids were in daycare and eventually school, and my community writing opportunities increased: private workshops above the coffee shop, occasional presentations at conferences and gatherings, and weekly sessions at a local housing authority, where I ended up spending eight years working with low-income women of color. At the same time, through Goddard, I was continually encountering students who needed to write their own stories first before they could access their whole selves and create studies of meaning. My students and workshop participants, whether non-traditional adult learners pursuing a master's degree at Goddard, or low-income women writing their way out of poverty in public housing, seemed to all be doing the same thing in their writing: finding who they truly were and where they needed to go in their lives.

At the same time, I realized that even in Kansas, not known for being the most progressive state on the block when it comes to funding arts-based programs, I could make a living simply by leading writing workshops. Granted, it would be a feast-or-famine living, but I found

increasing veins of funding, whether from private workshops, grants for drug and alcohol prevention re-routed to fund writing workshops, or state grants for a writing series that brought together retired women with at-risk teenage girls to write in a small Kansas town.

Given the possibilities of livelihood through TLA and the need for people to write about their lives, I wondered about Goddard offering a program in writing and healing. That initial impulse in 1998, after two years of planning, unfurled into a program that was more than just writing or therapeutic arts. Over time, it became clear to those of us planning TLA that we needed to embrace storytelling, spoken word, debate, community dialogues, singing and many other forms of words aloud or on the page for social change, community building, ecological restoration, and health and healing. A planning retreat with faculty and potential students led to the development of Transformative Language Arts, which launched in the fall of 2000 as part of the college's Individualized MA program.

Since that time, over seventy people have earned master's degrees at Goddard specializing in TLA. As we've needed to articulate more what TLA is, where its roots wind down into and how its branches expand up and out, it's become necessary to name and support this field of study. That necessity had led to the first TLA reader, *The Power of Words*, which Janet Tallman and I co-edited; the development of the TLA Network, a non-profit organization focused on all things TLA; an annual conference, The

Power of Words, started at Goddard in 2003 and now organized by the TLA Network; and many manner of growing TLA in the world.

While TLA, at fifteen years old, is becoming better known and understood, it's still a tricky term to define, much like explaining bioregionalism. Both name an ancient impulse with contemporary urgencies, in ways not unlike the prairie emerging from the brome field, starting gradually and becoming more self evident with each passing year. Bioregionalism points us toward more traditional ways of interacting with our land and local seasonal cycles so that we can develop new cultures, economies, and communities in balance with the earth where we life. TLA tips its hat to the roots of the oral tradition while setting out for new ground: an interdisciplinary convergence of artful words, personal growth and social change.

The diversity and depth of TLA, just as the diversity and depth of the land and sky right in front of us, can seem so commonplace that it's hard to see the distinctions. As someone who lives in a geographic and academic field, I try to see what's actually here, and then find the words to tell of it.

The Wild Diversity and Depth of One Field

When Ezra Nepon Berkley (who uses the pronoun “they”)—a writer, grassroots fundraiser, organizer and performer—started their MA in

TLA at Goddard College, they thought they might develop a workshop curriculum, write a collection of stories, or create a performance. Following the line of what they loved, they realized how much their Philadelphia community of Yiddish-revival and Queer activists and artists was often absent from history and largely invisible beyond itself.

Writing the stories of their community into history, Ezra embraced a new role as a people's historian, using language in transformative ways to tell the stories of marginalized and often invisible communities (5). “As a writer, performer, and organizer, I'm interested in how we build communities that allow us to not only survive but repair and regenerate from our individual and collective traumas, and demand transformation of the larger culture(s),” Ezra writes in their thesis (5). Their study of Jenny Romaine, a generator of avant-garde New Yiddish Theater, looked at how Romaine blends archival Yiddish sources with contemporary Yiddish culture to raise questions. Ezra also documented the work of the Eggplant Faerie Players, a performance troupe makes “ irreverent satire blends ingredients including clowning, camp, wordplay and musical numbers to raise awareness about gay culture and HIV/AIDS” (5). In Ezra's thesis *Unleashing Power in Yiddisbland and Faerieland: Spectacular Theatrical Strategies for Resistance and Resilience*, they writes,

As a historian – as someone offering stories and critical analysis about marginalized cultures – I'm asking questions about how these histories are archived, remembered, represented, and performed. I

was especially engaged by questions about what happens when researchers from marginalized cultures research and write about our own communities, or those we descend from. While there are certainly ethical concerns to be attended to, I was excited by the opportunities – the possibility of honoring parts of our culture that go unseen, unvalued, and even purposely hidden when viewed or objectified from outside the culture. How do we move beyond invisibility, nostalgia, or objectification to build new liberatory culture from our people's histories? (9)

Ezra's work also models how to use transformative language arts to document transformative language arts. Ezra's creative and spirited thesis employs interdisciplinary methodologies, including oral histories, archival research, deep examination of scholarship, social histories, and biographies, all to create a liberating and inclusive way of doing research that challenges the status quo of responding only to books, articles and interviews. In other words, the very way in which Ezra conducted this study demonstrates what an interdisciplinary methodology for TLA can look like.

Ezra is one of many pioneers in the emerging field of TLA as well as others, such as Jeanne Hewell Chambers, who did a study on the ethical issues involved in telling someone's story; Alexandra Hartman, who explored filmmaking as a form of TLA to reclaim what it means to be a body; and Deb Hensley, who explored how music, sound and words can enlarge our capacity for ecological justice. All of these studies arise out of

the intersection of various fields (academic disciplines of fields, such as ones visible as college departments) and traditions (either from within or outside of academic disciplines, such as memoir writing or Quaker traditions of group process). TLA is intrinsically interdisciplinary, drawing from literature and creative writing, mythology and the oral tradition, psychology, health and healing, social change and social welfare, drama and other arts.

Interdisciplinary study multiplies the complexities and potential found in single-discipline-study. Academic fields may come and go, but most people recognize “standard” fields, such as English, History, Mathematic, etc. From my research, and experience teaching at academic institutions since 1986, I agree with Allen F. Repko's overview on fields: “Each discipline has its own defining elements—phenomena, assumptions, epistemology, concepts, theories, and methods—that distinguish it from other disciplines (4).

Yet when something is officially deemed a field, it is open to interpretation. While researching this question, I came across debates on whether Communications, Theology and Public Works were legitimate academic fields. It's a little like defining what belongs in the canon of American literature: to one scholar, the canon holds mainly the work of dead white men; to another, the canon contains representative works from a wide spectrum of writers diverse in color, religion, gender, ethnicity and other distinctions. Disciplines are also mutable and subject to shifts in

culture, and are, according to Armin Krishan, “....themselves fragmented and heterogeneous, and which interact with other disciplines in many complex ways (5).

If it's challenging to define disciplines, it's challenging on steroids to define interdisciplinary, which implies the convergence of disciplines; multidisciplinary study, connoting a multiplicity of disciplines; and transdisciplinarity, which transcends singular (or even multiple) disciplinary definitions. Many interdisciplinary study departments and programs are set up to help students shift the balance from a small corner in a single discipline to a free-standing topic of inquiry shining out all directions to the fields and traditions it touches. For example, an interdisciplinary study of women using spoken word to navigate life with cancer could touch on the disciplines of women's studies, oncology, the oral tradition, creative writing (and the spoken word as a genre), sociology, and psychology.

Since most people can't, in any particular course of study, become “masters” in what's considered the core readings, trends and issues in six or more fields with great thoroughness, mastery needs to focus on one integrated focus. Someone conducting a study of storytelling workshops for middle-class, Latino men on what it means to be male might research group facilitation particularly in arts-based workshops, gender roles, contemporary Latino culture, storytelling and the oral tradition, and related topics, all funneled through the focus of the study.

This is a far cry from disciplinary studies which often mirror my

experience in earning my MA in Creative Writing: I was literally told to read ten texts from list A and ten from list B to achieve a sense of mastery, a process more akin to ordering take-out Chinese food. In interdisciplinary study, students choose texts and then name for themselves what they're learning, a process that is a quantum leap away from how most colleges are set up as a collection of departments and programs. A study in TLA on collaborative performance and interfaith theater to address a polarized community would draw from the fields of Religious Studies, Drama, Social Work and Education, and traditions, such as the interfaith dialogue movement, bringing together academically odd bedfellows for the sake of finding innovative solutions to a current social issue.

Interdisciplinary studies give scholars the advantage of multiple perspectives in addressing issues, solving problems and discovering new ways of seeing the world. A study of Virginia Woolf's novels within a typical English department might employ applying literary theory, such as biographical analysis, to the author, all of which could spark new ways to see Woolf and their writing. An interdisciplinary study, such what Louise DeSalvo did in *Writing as a Way of Healing* looks at Woolf's writing (and other writers) in the context of trauma studies, literature, expressive arts, sociology, psychology and women's studies. DeSalvo is then able to land on the conclusion that "The difference between a victim and a survivor is the meaning made of the trauma" (215).

The mature prairie is as strong as it is diverse. Within a square foot

of tallgrass prairie, you can often find dozens of species of grasses and wildflowers. Unlike a monoculture field, such as all brome, a diverse prairie is far more sustainable because its strength doesn't depend on one particular plant being resistant to rain, heat, drought, cold, and many varieties of insects and other animals. At the same time, the prairie perseveres because of its deep roots: switch grass roots entangled with big bluestem roots and the roots of many other forbs and flowers many feet down.

The deepening, diverse roots of the emerging field of TLA create work that often can stand strong, making meaning despite and because of change. Like TLA, life itself shows us continually how interdisciplinary it is.

Soft Boundaries and the Fire of Discernment

Each spring, we burn the prairie, dragging dried tallgrass prairie, wrapped like spaghetti around pitchforks, on fire, across one field's edge to make a backfire. Then we do the same on the opposite side, the one that the wind is behind. When the rushing fire meets the backfire, it flares up, then dies down, leaving a neatly-charred prairie. The fire leaves nutrients in the soil, which feed the grasses, and it also burns away invader trees.

While I live in the kingdom of tallgrass prairie, native grasses that grow six-to-eight feet high across rolling hills, reddening in winter and fading to pale tan in high summer, I also live in an eco-region with

emerging woodlands, moving in from the east. The soft boundaries between prairie and woodlands make for a dynamic play of forest and field, particularly generative for wildlife that thrives on the edges of regions. Yet too many trees can overwhelm and especially starve out a prairie, so aside from mowing down starter-trees, which isn't all that effective, the main and best way to maintain and even bring back native prairie is with fire.

Academic fields, especially interdisciplinary ones, are not so different. We benefit from soft boundaries in which a study of one topic can overlap with related topics. At the same time, when it comes to such interdisciplinary fields, it's necessary to use the fire of discernment to see as clearly as possible our study, and its particular TLA focus.

The field of TLA shares soft boundaries with many related fields such as Journal Therapy, Narrative Therapy, Social Work and Welfare, Educational Psychology, and Creative Writing, as well as traditions like the Amherst Writers and Artists method, protest songs, and Storytelling for Community Building approaches. Many forms of using language for social and personal transformation could be said to be expressions of TLA; TLA could be said to be a form of such modalities. For years, we've debated when TLA is a big tent, under which so many sister-fields could find shelter, or whether TLA is under the tent of one of the sister-fields.

What is distinct about TLA is its reach, bringing together realms not usually sharing the same space. TLA focuses on the river that runs through all forms of the spoken, written and sung word for a purpose beyond

entertainment or expression, bridging the gap between personal growth and health, and societal change. For example, mental health counseling often focuses on an individual changing his/her habitual responses, outside of the cultural contexts of the individual's issues (such as environmental degradation related to a person feeling depressed). A storytelling workshop for people living with depression, however, might focus on telling stories that encompass the layers of our lives: the personal, communal, cultural and global.

Consequently, in developing TLA in concert with my colleagues at and beyond Goddard, I looked wide, toward many related fields and traditions, and deep, toward a common core of social and individual transformation through words. Along the way, I worked with people involved in Poetry Therapy, Drama Therapy, Playback Theater, Journal Therapy, Amherst Writers and Artists writing workshops, Quaker Traditions of Facilitation, Autoethnography, Theatre of the Oppressed, activist songwriting traditions of singer-songwriters from Woody Guthrie to Mary Chapin Carpenter; and storytelling for community building, business and healing.

What I found central to all these fields and traditions is the potential for words to intentionally change the world. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosophy whose work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* looks at the essence of words and change in a way that articulates this core of TLA:

An unauthentic word, one which is unable to transform reality,

results when dichotomy is imposed upon its constitutive elements. When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating “blah.” It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action.....To speak a true word is to transform the world (87).

TLA's focus on the speaking of true words, with the aim to change the world, is one of the main reason TLA was born at Goddard, which holds this mission statement: “To advance cultures of rigorous inquiry, collaboration, and lifelong learning, where individuals take imaginative and responsible action in the world” (*TLA Addendum 2*). While a philosophy of a TLA program at another institution would have its own language and focus, here is what, over years of consideration, we came up with as the TLA philosophy at Goddard:

- [Personal and social transformation is at the heart of becoming a lifelong learner committed to the welfare of your community and the planet.
- [Creativity and transformation as an individual and communal process embraces both a collaborative approach and you

individually mapping out your own learning practice, one that includes using your own voice to create your own definitions and applications.

- [Defining all the defining terms as part of TLA's philosophy comes from the understanding that true transformation only comes when the ones transformed can claim and name their own experience.
- [Honoring both the spoken and written word is especially relevant to progressive education's ideal that individuals must take charge of their learning and expression.
- [Interdisciplinary theory and practice is an illustration of how TLA, like all programs at Goddard, looks beyond standardized disciplines that often compartmentalize knowledge to more integrated and relevant ways of knowing. Such a focus helps you see the big picture behind the work you wish to do in your community and in your own artistic practice.
- [Greater perspective on your place in the world clearly relates to Goddard's emphasis on welfare for others and the Earth.
- [The very nature of TLA calls for a non-elitist, non-competitive and non-dogmatic atmosphere where deep and respectful listening to one another and listening to ourselves, as well as passionate and thoughtful questioning are central.
- [The TLA work you do in your communities extends Goddard's mission to build and sustain a community of learners beyond the

college itself. (*Addendum* 7-8)

This philosophy translates into theoretical groundwork: reading widely in TLA and deeply in the student's particular focus, and covering core reading areas, which draw from multiple fields and traditions:

1. Qualitative Research Methodology, and/or Quantitative and Alternative Research Methodologies
2. Mythology, the Oral Tradition and/or Poetics
3. TLA Modalities and/or Traditions (such as poetry therapy, expressive writing, storytelling)
4. Literature from the U.S. and Around the World
5. Education/Pedagogy and/or Facilitation
6. Social Action
7. Psychology
8. TLA in Practice Today (13-15)

Additionally, students work toward core competencies in ethical dimensions of their work, appropriate facilitation skills and experience, interdisciplinary context, TLA as an emerging field and their specific focus in depth, and an individual TLA artistic practice (which may include everything from the craft of fiction-writing to songwriting to spoken word performance).

Altogether, the TLA program at Goddard speaks to a broad

definition of TLA focus in three directions: community, art and scholarship. The implicit understanding here is that people who perform, facilitate or organize Transformative Language Arts in their communities need to both walk the talk by doing their own transformative language arts, and to be aware of the big picture informing and shaping the need for this work. By studying why women may feel silenced in certain communities, a TLAer can better understand the social, psychological, historic, anthropological, economic and other factors enforcing this lack of voice, and can, hopefully, develop approaches that will be more effective.

Study, activism and personal artistic practice all influence how we define TLA as well as how we do TLA. When I facilitated the housing authority workshops for women of color, I came to the table with years of experience writing through hard times, and could more readily understand ways to point writing prompts to help participants cultivate meaning and hope. From having studied history and class issues, I had some sense of how economic divides, and perceptions of what we're entitled to do with our lives based on class issues. Of course, I learned far more from the housing authority residents than I had ever learned through reading women's studies books on history and class issues, and I learned more about the capacity of our writing to give us strength than I had previously known on own. Yet that process of being led by what's been given to me speaks to the points of the TLA philosophy at Goddard.

TLA also exists well beyond the Goddard program, where it is

unfurling in new ways. When I googled “Transformative Language Arts” and excluded myself or Goddard College from the search, I found dozens of people who are practicing TLA in their communities as their livelihood, some who had been through the Goddard program such as Jen Cross and her business, Writing Ourselves Whole in San Francisco, and some who name their studies at other institutions as TLA, such as Karen VanMeenen, a graduate of the University of Vermont who teaches at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Some people incorporate TLA into their teaching, such as Suzanne Ehst (a Goddard graduate), alumnus who developed a curriculum for a private Mennonite girls' high school in Michigan on how to use writing and interfaith reading for spiritual development. Others make their paths, such as storyteller Doug Lipman, a storyteller who mentors other storytellers, particularly in ways to make a living.

I also found articles in local papers and scholarly journals by or about people who do TLA, such as Khadijah Ali-Coleman, co-Founder of Liberated Muse and the Capitol Hip Hop Soul Festival in Washington, D.C. who considers herself a TLA practitioner. There are many people who call themselves transformative language artists, teach TLA, lead workshops, do consulting and coaching, and write about TLA at a growing number of institutions and organizations, such as Writers Corps in San Francisco, Alternatives Magazine, Radical Psychology (a scholarly journal), University of Maine, the Resistance Ecology Conference, Gettysburg College, Right Hand Resources (a consulting firm), and the Leeway Foundation.

This is a partial, changing and growing list (as is the nature of the internet), but it demonstrates that TLA is emerging in various places, altogether growing into its own field. It may, from various angles, look like the field of social change theater or journal therapy or storytelling for community building, but it's the sum of all these angles that's at the center of TLA's potential. It's also true that a clearer definition of TLA—as it's seen and accepted overall by many who embrace this term—will emerge over time.

Revery Will Do

It ends with a workshop on a sunny, cold day in the winter. This time, we're in an ordinary office building on State Line Road, one side in Kansas and other in Missouri, a true place of border crossings.

I arrive at Turning Point: The Center for Hope and Healing, located on the Kansas side, with my arms full. Some of the workshop participants, already there, help me carry in bags of fresh fruit and vegetables, hummus and corn chips. Once in the door, I put down some of the food and hug Cathy Pendleton, the director of Adult Programming at this exceptional non-profit organization, which provides people of all ages living with serious illness support groups and workshops. Cathy hands me copies of my handout and a list of participants—twenty five people confirmed, plus a waiting list—all of whom either live with cancer, M.S. Parkinson's disease,

or other illnesses, or are caregivers for people living with illness. For a decade, I've been leading Sunday afternoon writing retreats here once every month or two, and like most workshop days, today I see many of the regulars plus some new people, who walk in tentatively, clutching a notebook or asking if this is the right place.

It is the right place, and within a hour, we're sitting around a hodgepodge of tables arranged in a circle of sorts, notebooks open, handouts close by, and a table nearby overloaded with the snacks some participants and I set out. As the chocolate and tissues are passed around, people write of their lives up close and with expansive perspective. Some are sitting in wheelchairs, some in chairs with walkers or canes nearby, and some wearing headscarves or wigs as they balance writing with the side effects of chemotherapy racing in their bloodstreams. Sometimes people cry when they introduce themselves. Sometimes we laugh so hard we almost fall out of our seats. Some of us consider ourselves writers and others cringe at the validity of calling themselves more than dabblers, but it's no matter: together we write right into the heart of whatever we're living and learning.

John Willison, who began coming to the writing workshops I facilitating here about three year ago, when his cancer was in remission, now updates us on how his parotid cancer has metastasized to three of his vertebrae, a slow-moving cancer, but a moving cancer nonetheless. When I suggest writing in response to a Linda Pastan poem called "Threshold," a

poem that speaks to what we're crossing over or through at this moment in our lives, John writes this poem:

I have my home in two worlds

This one:

With all its wild running,
Stuffing my pockets full of pleasure.
A smile the size of a candy shop!

I open my closet,
My whole life pours out
In excessive sweetness.

Even my suffering has taken a shine.
Running my fingers over my scars,
What were once indignities
Are now a flutter in the heart...

I bashfully flirt with every beauty.

The blushing maple, there
That brushstroke of moon.

Her hand on my chest,
Light as air,
And just as needed.

It's all an enchantment.

I am aware of the windows being shut at the back of the house,
The doors, propped open, closing.
But this is not to be a constraint, a prison for beggars.

Not a house of sorrows.

Yes, everything will tremble.

All will fall.

This container will topple off the shelf and shatter,
Spilling into an infinite field,

Where this greeting awaits:

Hello, darling. Welcome home.

~ John Willison

TLA is, at its heart, about welcoming ourselves home to who we

are, what the world is, and how we can live with greater vision and compassion, with awareness that “All will fall,” and yet finding the language to “...bashfully flirt with every beauty,” which certainly could be called an act of reverie.

“To make a prairie,” Emily Dickinson writes, take clover and a bee - something already growing there and someone to pollinate it to spread the clover. But it also takes reverie, the art of living fully however life comes, and the long practice of conversing with our life callings.

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NARRATIVES: TLA IN THE COMMUNITY

**A Transformative Experience of Soulful Gardening:
Cultivating the Mind, Body, and Spirit**

Geraldine Cannon Becker

Purpose

I consider myself to be a lifelong learner on an educational path working closely along with others. As an educator, one of my main goals has been to help enrich and empower lives through the process of education, and to encourage others to continue on the path of what one of the founding fathers of Analytical Psychology, C. G. Jung, has called individuation, a lifelong process with a goal of becoming more fully whole and hopefully more aware of intricate connections. Notice, I said I am “on the path” not going “up” or “down” the path, and I am there along with others. Looking within ourselves may take us deeper, and being more self-reflective may help us learn more about ourselves so that we may better empathize with others, but we need to look outside ourselves, too. We may gather with others in small groups or gatherings and share our work, tell our stories, or collaborate together.

As Jungian analyst, and author of thirteen books, including *What*

Matters Most, James Hollis might say, I “step into largeness” by making choices to take risks and enlarge myself as I help others enlarge themselves (63). In this paper I will describe my own process of pattern seeking, and the transformative experience of the cultivation of wholeness, or individuation. This has been furthered through life-long learning, self-reflection, and the use of active imagination with dream figures, as well as through community outreach, collaborations, and applied arts-based research practices, which I have used in my own classrooms and in workshops. I have helped participants find ways to express themselves in writing journal entries, narratives or poems, as well as through dialoging with images, and using storytelling in arts-based workshops.

Flower images, dream images, and the garden—which may be an idea or image in the mind, an actual place to go, and an action that may take place inside or outside—are threads weaving throughout this paper. Through collaborative and transformative language arts practices, I believe in engaging mind, body, and spirit at the same time. Cultivating a greater sense of awareness of humanity, the self and of others, in unified collaboration with others who are also working to increase their own such awareness, seems to activate an openness to the transformative experience of a kind of soulful gardening that further encourages spontaneous creation. Authentic learning opportunities blossom in the midst of the teachable moment, after what I call “soul flowering” takes place. Participants help bring something into being that, in turn, helps them

become more fully human, and they are encouraged to find transformative ways to share their work with others.

I have been doing a lot of self-reflection lately, and paying more attention to images that keep being drawn to my attention, often quite literally—through artistic creations and reproductions. Over a period of time, I have noted some interesting patterns and also observed some seemingly unconnected but significant events—or what C. G. Jung, has called synchronicities—which often take place at the same time and have a greater, more powerful, meaning for me because of this. These patterns and events seem to have an underlying role and purpose to encourage in me a greater awareness of soulful connections—between idea, place, and action—mind, body, and spirit, as I move towards individuation.

Indeed, as a creative writer and scholar, I often prefer to work alone, but as an educator I am finding more joy in nurturing learners, working with others on collaborative community projects, and in leading arts-based workshops that seem to have greater impact on more lives. Working closely together, we may ask one another questions to get to know each other better. What do we have in common? What do we know well? What do we want to know more about? Conversation isn't easy for some people. We all have flaws, and those flaws help make us who we are. So much depends upon perception. Both self-reflection on images and creative collaboration with others—working with a shared awareness, energy, and initiative—may be necessary to achieve a greater sense of the wholeness of

being.

Mind: Budding Interests, and Foundation

I believe many of my own early life experiences as an “at risk” learner, growing up poor in Southern Appalachia—being a first generation high school graduate, and first generation college student—have helped me have greater empathy with other “at risk” learners, such as adult basic readers, many of whom are working towards passing the GED, a high school equivalency exam. This is something which some of my own family members have also done. As a child, I loved learning to read, and I wanted to share what I thought of as “rich” knowledge with others. I enjoyed “playing school” with my sisters whenever possible, but there were even earlier lessons I remember, and images my mind returns to again and again, especially in times of great stress.

One of my earliest memories is of my mother teaching me how to draw a complex Celtic image of a love knot—an endless knot (see fig. 1, Appendix), one that she would often draw with lots of vines and flowers. My mother also loved gardening, and she sold plants and flowers. I used to help her gather and prepare them, being sad to see the prettiest ones be shipped away. Through those flowers, in a teachable moment, my mother reminded me that we were connected to others, often at a great distance. Sometimes customers would send notes and photos of our plants and

flowers in a different garden, asking advice to keep them healthy. The flowers when they were first planted didn't have a choice of location, and many plants do need help in order to flourish in certain conditions and zones.

Now, because of those early lessons, before I buy a plant, I do lots of research, self-reflection, and evaluation. When I do buy a plant, I often talk to it, and invite it to tell me where it wants to take root. I even sleep and dream on these decisions. Often, I will dream of the plant in a particular location in the yard, and then that's where I put it, unless circumstances intervene to prevent this from coming into being. I have invited my two daughters to practice this kind of reflective exercise and work with dream images in this manner, and they have helped me with our garden selections, though their main interest is in artwork. In fact, we have all worked together to create several garden beds, and we've participated in arts-based workshops together. Still, our individual interests often connect in surprising ways.

For instance, while I was at work on my computer, in the process of refining my definition of "soul flowering" for an art-based tile painting workshop for a community garden project, my youngest daughter, paused in the doorway to ask me a question, and she struck a pose that immediately reminded me of Audrey Hepburn. I had previously compared my youngest to this actress before, when she was all dressed up and ready for a dance (see fig. 2, Appendix), but this time my daughter wanted to see

a Hepburn film. I had a tingly feeling that a golden “teachable moment” might be approaching for both of us—giving us a chance to open up and really blossom.

Together, we did some research and decided to watch *My Fair Lady*. I knew in advance that this film was based on G. B. Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, but I had forgotten just how much of the film involved flowers, and how often the word “soul” came up in the dialog. Just watching the film with my daughter felt like a “soul flowering” or threshold experience to me, because of my own upbringing, having been an “at risk” learner. We stopped for a time together in a doorway, and when we stepped away from the threshold, I noticed that we both had grown. This film gave us lots to talk about from heritage, cultural expectations, and society constrictions to the influence of money, education, and language in one’s life.

Through the process of my own education, I have gone from selling flowers (much like the main character in the film, Eliza Doolittle), to teaching English (although, not exactly in the manner of Prof. Higgins, Doolittle’s instructor) and Creative Writing on a college campus. However, I also lead community arts-based workshops and reading circles for adult basic readers. As noted before, I’m certain that my own early experiences have helped prepare me to help other “at risk” learners, such as adult basic readers and first generation college students.

The first thing I have to do when working with adult learners is to gain their trust. “Education,” as one of my professors at Winthrop

University informed me in one of my first college classes, comes from the Latin “educare,” which means minding or tending with care, or drawing out knowledge. It can take time and patience. It is hard to get people to see what they do not want to see, just as it is hard for people to concentrate on education when their lives have been derailed.

Esteem is at the center of what I have recently called the “Unwanted Inferiority Complex”—unwanted because the person who has it does not want it, does not ask for it, and when in the grips of it, the person also often feels unwanted, ashamed, alone, and abandoned—even when in the midst of a group. In terms of positive and negative manifestations of this inferiority complex, a person’s self-esteem may be high or low. In terms of generative and destructive aspects, it can lead to feelings of grandiosity or insecurity.

What is the genesis? Most feelings of insecurity, on the individual level, seem to stem from a wound of the past—a slight or a perceived slight. When someone’s voice was not heard, when someone looked away in disgust, or when what is thought of as a basic right of life was violated. This kind of thing may happen within the culture, or slights may come from people outside the culture. On the cultural level, however, it is important to remember that insecurity may be inherited or handed-down, so that the wound may not be something that happened to an individual, but something the individual was born into, such as poverty.

Thinking of Adult Basic Readers (ABR), a person who has to

pretend to read to be able to get a job may not be able to keep that pretense up for long. A person can trust a “superior” to help them learn in order to do a better job and keep the job, or doubt that the “superior” would be concerned about their personal welfare and lose the job. A person may or may not consciously experience the unwanted inferiority complex or it may influence them unconsciously. A person who cannot read may feel anger or shame when the unwanted inferiority complex is activated. I know about this first hand, from watching a father who could not read take printed material from someone and “look it over,” in front of the “superior,” saying “I’ll get back to you on this,” before asking one of his children to read the content to him later. People may try to “bluff” their way through reading in life, trying to appear strong and proud, when they really may feel meek and humble—or even shame—when it comes to not understanding the written word. This can have an impact on more lives than we may even be able to imagine.

I often wonder about the early memories of my own children and which of their life experiences will end up being the most influential for them in later years. I wonder what images will come to them in times of stress, for example, and what will have been handed-down unintentionally. I previously mentioned that one of my own early memories was of drawing Celtic love knots with my mother (see fig. 1, Appendix). I still find it soothing to draw this symbol. Dr. Joseph Cambrey actually briefly wrote about this symbol in *Synchronicity: Nature and Psyche in an Interconnected*

Universe. He presented an image of a complex knot (56), and described its asymmetrical qualities. Celtic knots could be pinned at the start, so each side could be more parallel. Still, some rotation would have to take place, just as Dr. Cambrey says, for true symmetry or an exact “mirror image” reproduction.

Thinking again of the mother/child relationship, though we may share similarities with our parents, of course, we are never exact reproductions, and our relationships will invariably be different, even if we try to replicate our positive childhood experiences. For example, even though I have drawn Celtic love knots with my daughters from an early age, this may not be as significant an event for them as it was for me with my mother. So, the love knots we create together may be different, but the threads will still connect in ways we may never be able to explain, because we may never fully know. However, we can share our stories in creative ways, and discover what resonates with others.

Interestingly, Dr. Joseph Cambrey also touched upon this in *Synchronicity*, exploring synchronicity as looking at “such events where the meaningful experience of the person the event is happening to can be understood by others, as in the metaphoric resonances of the coincidence, but the unique quality of the experience cannot be wholly communicated;” Dr. Cambrey discussed synchronicity in conjunction with what Jung called his “mirror complex,” looking at images to see if a mirror placed in the center would reflect an exact image, and further explored how

synchronicity was “symmetry-breaking” (67).

In the art world, “reproductions” are often seen as “inferior,” but sometimes they can even be more valuable than the original because they, too, are “unique” or different from the original. Thus, I find that Cambray has honed in on an important aspect of synchronicity and its subjective “starting condition.” He said synchronous events have an “asymmetric dimension,” are “unique, not reproducible, and have an idiosyncratic quality” (67).

Something I share with transformative language arts practitioners in my own classes and workshops is that in addition to drawing love knots, and doing artwork, I have often used writing to work through complex emotions in my own life. In fact, poetry is known for its largely non-paraphrasable nature, and I have a poem, called “Reproductions” (Glad Wilderness 58), that is meant to invoke a mirror with a crack in it, as it is in two columns, with one column is set lower than the other (see fig. 3, Appendix).

This poem helped me deal with my own intense mother/daughter feelings of anxiety and separation, as my first-born daughter really began to break away. In arts-based workshops, if a person wants to write on the hands-on project we are making, I tell them to go ahead. In fact, I encourage them to “let go” and “let be.” I ask them to think about what the project wants to become, and tell them to let the content be the guide. I did this almost instinctively, even before I read about any arts-based

research methods.

As an example, I'll summarize part of a narrative essay that I had published, in a book called *Empowering Women Through Literacy: Views From Experience*. To help adults learn to be comfortable reading aloud, I used books that were written for children in reading circles with Adult Basic Education (ABE) learners in "New Books, New Readers," a program sponsored by the Maine Humanities Council. One unit we explored together was called "Freedom," and my group decided to make kites as a hands-on pre-reading activity that the group decided to call "Freedom Takes Flight" (see fig. 4, Appendix).

One of the participants had not realized she was drawing and writing on her kite upside down, until it was time to hang them up. She had written "Freedom: Against All Odds..." This participant was so ashamed that she had "messed up" and she almost ripped her kite up, but I was able to assure her that the kite was perfect. It fit the theme well, and in short, we all agreed: "That kite would fly" (3-6). That was a teachable moment, and our discussion of the freedom theme that day was "soul flowering" for many in the group, who had seen this take place and had felt so empowered by the embodied and enriching experience. We had been together on a threshold, and because of the shared narrative experience we were able to walk through a metaphorical garden gate, and continue growing together. The learners opened themselves up into a new learning experience as we read aloud together after that in our reading circle. We shared stories and

learned together. Some of these learners have gone on to enroll in college classes.

Saying the phrase “we learned together,” almost feels “soul flowering” to me, because of the “blossoming” experiences I have shared with another group. I have been working with WE LEARN (Women Expanding: Literacy, Education, Action, Resource, Network), founded by Mev Miller, for a number of years. In “WE LEARN: Working on Fertile Edges,” she defines WE LEARN as “a community promoting women’s literacy as a tool that fosters empowerment and equity for women” (175). I first wrote to Miller when I moved to Maine, and had no prospects for a job in teaching. I had wanted to lead some reading circles, and we began a correspondence that has continued over the years, and brought much enrichment to my life.

I have been on the selection committee for WE LEARN’s *Women’s Perspectives*, a publication featuring work by ABE learners, and after undergoing a peer-review process, I have been fortunate to have had two of my own essays selected for publication in two different books via WE LEARN calls for submission. Recently, however, I was invited to be on the Board of Directors for this network, and I co-chaired the 2014 conference: “Women’s Literacy Gardens” (see fig. 5, Appendix). Needless to say, working with Miller has helped me gain more confidence and boosted my own esteem. As Miller said in her essay, “Creating a Community of Women Educated in Literacy: “WE LEARN and we *are* the

fertile places, working on the edges to weave dynamic forces for transformation and change” (86); we all contribute:

As a membership network, WE LEARN embraces the energies, expertise, and experiences of teachers, advocates, students, and community members who have seen first-hand the ways that literacy education opens a world of opportunity for women. We are all activist-scholars who continue to explore, understand, unpack, and challenge the repressive policies and curriculums that impact women learners in ABE generally marginalized or disenfranchised through institutionalized oppressions based on race, gender, class, violence, ethnicity, citizenship, learning disability, and other intersecting factors.

WE LEARN, as a group, is complex, and our learning continues. No one in the group wants to feel inferior, and we may long to “have arrived” somewhere, but the path goes on... As well, there are many garden gates, and we may wander down separate garden paths, but we know we will eventually gather together again. Indeed, I am continuing my education with this group on a path that has no end in sight, and I did not see the place where I am now from the beginning. In fact, my youngest daughter has now helped me present work at a WE LEARN conference, just as my eldest did before her. I encourage my students to participate, as well, and have had former workshop participants sharing their own transformative language arts narratives and leading their own storytelling workshops at WE LEARN.

When I told my eldest daughter, who has now gone away to study art in college, that I was planning to write a paper that would focus on the image of a woman who had significantly appeared to me three times in a relatively short span of time, she told me that she had recently written a brief report on this same woman, Frida Kahlo, for an art class she was taking. The air was alive with an emotionally charged, almost electric quality. We both felt it, and shared an intense look, as she said: “There’s the fourth.” We then talked about her own work with Kahlo’s images, and this was an opportunity for us to grow and learn together in ways that we might not have done otherwise in the short time she was home from school.

Body: Images Electric, and Numinous with Synchronicity

Transformative events may take place in our lives, and these events may have more meaning than usual for us because they bring to our awareness something that we were unconscious of before, and they may do so in surprisingly improbable and profoundly moving ways. For me, synchronicities are numinous, so I experience a warmth radiating out from my chest, along with a tingling sensation, that feels like a jolt of electricity spreading out to the edges of my body—including my fingers and toes. I usually have a temporary sensation that if it were possible, through no power of my own, I would be glowing from within at just that moment,

when C. G. Jung would say an archetype was activated by the synchronicity of two or more acausally connected occurrences. Jung's own definition of synchronicity changed and developed over the years, but the feeling of the numinous is often a key characteristic for people in deciding whether something is a synchronicity or just a meaningful coincidence in life. With the numinous, it has metaphorical meaning and a deeper or archetypal meaning, as well. Archetypal psychologist, James Hillman might have us ask "who is here now—who is visiting?" Who is crossing time and space from the archetypal realm?

Last semester my husband and I team-taught an Honors Seminar: "On Being Human," a course that I had previously developed on my own (and had actually called "my baby"). We worked together to introduce various units over the semester. We had one three-hour presentation on art. While re-reading the textbook, *The Art of Being Human*, to prepare for class, I became fascinated by an image that I had never found to be so captivating: "Frida Kahlo's Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States—1932 (152)." I think my initial attraction to it was because of the image of the larger than life woman, holding a heritage flag, standing on the border between the natural/organic (Mexico) and the man-made/mechanical (USA), with the flag of "freedom" flying in the background (see fig. 6, Appendix). This connects back to the "freedom" theme I had studied with the adult basic education learners, and it also connects to my natural/organic (Celtic) heritage.

While reading about the bus accident that left Frida unable to have children, though she had wanted them, and about how she was “primarily known as Diego Rivera’s wife during her lifetime” (152), I began thinking it was no wonder that around one-third of her paintings were self-portraits. Her “intensely personal” art may have been a kind of “giving birth,” a way of trying to “reproduce” herself and her heritage. I thought then that I would have to explore her life in more detail, to see if I could ascertain more about the role and purpose of her significant appearance in my life because I had goose-bumps while reading about her. This was the first numinous instance.

When my husband and I held the three-hour art class in our Honors seminar, we had invited two artists to present on why art is important in their lives. One of the local artists, Lulu Pelletier, did a hands-on workshop with us, and we all painted with watercolors. I had done a collaborative workshop with Lulu and my daughters the previous summer. The other artist, a Professor of the University of Maine at Fort Kent, Dr. Terry Murphy, brought in several of her own works, and explained her own creative process, telling us stories about each work. One work was kept covered in a dark cloth the entire time she was talking, and everyone was curious about it. When she revealed what was underneath, I’m sure I let out an audible gasp. Again, there was the feeling of the numinous, and I tried to explain my reaction to the class.

Dr. Murphy displayed her creative collage, called “Frida Under

Glass on Satin,” made using a decorative cardboard fan that someone had given her, with the face of Frida filling up the whole fan (see fig. 7, Appendix). Dr. Murphy turned the handle into a body, and added elements (like yarn, ribbon, lace, etc.) for arms, legs, breasts. She included a pink satin flower for the privates/vagina area. This presentation of the collage astounded me, for many reasons, but especially because of the idea of “reproduction,” and how Frida had been “de-flowered” in a sense, by the accident, and had “re-flowered” through art. Also, my concept of “soul flowering” was heavily on my mind, as I had just submitted a “soul flowering” paper for consideration, and I was planning more creative arts-based workshops. This was the second instance.

I am certain that another reason Dr. Murphy’s image and narrative so strongly captivated me was because it reminded me of collaborative work the creative artist Mica Hendricks has been doing with her four-year-old daughter. Hendricks draws a face or a head and then lets her daughter finish the drawing, then Hendricks colors the drawing and posts it to her blog. They have stories about many of their characters, and they are planning a book. Their first collaboration went viral on the internet (see fig. 8.1, Appendix). I have been in contact with Hendricks and we are scheduling an interview for *The Aroostook Review*, an online literary journal housed at the University of Maine at Fort Kent. I am sure she will give me more insights on creative collaborations. Hendricks has now done interviews for various blogs, including *The Ellen Degeneres Show’s* blog—*The*

Good News.

Amazingly, the third instance actually came from Hendricks' blog, and that's when it really hit home for me that there had to be more to this image of Frida than I am even fully aware of at this point in my life. Hendricks blogged about her daughter's love for Frida, and she drew Frida's head and let her daughter draw the body (see fig. 8.2, Appendix). Her daughter drew flowers on the head and body—big, beautiful flowers, like the flowers Eliza Doolittle had admired so much, in *My Fair Lady*. Hendricks' daughter drew three large red flowers on the body—I assume these are representations of Frida's privates—breasts/vagina. In each hand Frida holds a paintbrush, but upon seeing this image that, itself, came into being through a child—I started thinking of images of Hekate/Hecate. She is often depicted as a crone, but she has more than one aspect—maiden, mother, crone. She is also depicted holding two torches to guide the way in or out of a threshold, and she is said to illuminate the darkness or light up the night sky (see fig. 9, Appendix).

Spirit: Actively Creating Connection

I recently became aware of a powerful feminine presence in my dreams. I know she has been there for a long time, but I had not really paid enough attention to her. In November 2012, I dreamed of myself as a young girl walking barefoot down cold, grey stone stairs in twilight. I was

following small, white butterflies down a path between stones set into the ground in spiral shapes, leading towards a center circle that I immediately realized was my backyard circle garden (although the dream garden was larger and the shrubbery was fuller—and the butterflies had grown incrementally larger than they had been when the dream first began—in fact, I was aging, as well, from a young girl—of perhaps eight—to a teen—of perhaps 18 years).

In the dream, I looked up to see lush greenery, and white flowers shining in what I took to be the moonlight from beyond my shoulder. Suddenly, as I thought of the moon, I had a view of myself from above. In looking down, I saw myself as a young mother, and I also saw the shape of a butterfly on the ground. The Renaissance Spiraea shrubs were spreading out like wings in the white lilacs, and the two spirals at the start of the path were the curled ends on antennae, like those on a Monarch butterfly, but the butterflies in my dream were white not orange—and they suddenly became moths—large pale Luna moths.

I had transformed again from a young mother (who was, perhaps, age 28) to the age that I currently am now—an older mother (age 46). I had a look of being in the fullness of life—with my current figure, after giving birth to and nursing two children. I had not given birth in my dream, and I just knew the baby was still inside me, even when I could not see a swollen belly. One aspect that was clearly missing or hidden from view was the crone. I did not age beyond my current years in the dream.

However, I wore a white gown that billowed so my shape was sometimes hard to see, as it hid my body. There was a light from above. It was beyond me. Was this a full moon—or could it have been a torch of Hekate, as twilight guide? I didn't see. I watched my dream self, as Hekate might, from a distance. I saw myself twirl around like a child in the circle and grow younger again with each spin, falling down, dizzy, and happy. Then, on the ground, I was in my body again, crawling around as if I were looking for something I had lost.

The moths were gone, but fireflies were there, waiting in the tall grass for their mates to find them—sending out little sparks of life. I was crawling out of the circle toward the opening at the entrance, but I did not really want to leave. The light was brighter at the opening and the dream felt like a kind of giving birth. As happy as I had been to be in the circle—unbroken by the passage of time—I knew I would have to find a way to take that happiness with me, moving out into the world awake—for I was aware that much that I had dreamed might really exist. It might just be waiting to be born.

At the time of the dream, I was actually in the process of planning a garden expansion, as fall is a great time for planning what may take place in the spring, and I used some of the dream content to make my selections of the shrubbery I would buy to plant later. Jean Shinoda Bolen, said, in *Goddesses in Older Women: Archetypes in Women Over Fifty*, Hekate/Hecate is at the crossroads “when a woman enters the third phase of her life and heeds

a pull inward (47).

Marion Woodman, in *The Pregnant Virgin*, said: “As life progresses, we may continue to abandon our [inner] child by pleasing others . . . that child, who is our very *soul* cries out from underneath the rubble of our lives, often from the core of our worst complex,” and “we dare not drop the tensions;” she said: “if we reject one part of ourselves, we give up our past; if we reject the other part, we give up our future. We must hold onto our roots and build from there” (25). When faced with these tensions, a person might think of themselves as being in the crossroads, seeing things from more than one perspective. It can be chaotic and confusing. A person might want to wrap up in a fetal position or cocoon themselves.

In this same book Woodman points out “that the butterfly is a symbol of the human soul” (14). In my dream I began following white butterflies that transformed and became part of the garden itself, needing more care and tending as it grows. Interestingly, the garden was growing wild and fast in that dream, and when I was finally able to plant some of the shrubs that I had selected because of this dream, I wondered how they would fare.

Indeed, they grew wild and fast last summer, even without much tending from me, since it was such a rainy summer. Everything in the yard grew that way, and it almost seemed “uncultivated” out there, at times. This, in fact, corresponds with dreams I began having right after the plantings had taken place in the spring, as I tried to connect more with the

woman who had started appearing to me in my dreams, and she re-introduced me to some winged and “wild” dream figures, including firefly, dragon, and dinosaur.

Of course, I have to acknowledge that I am growing older, and I am on my way towards “coming to age,” as Jane R. Prétat might have said. Prétat wrote a book called *Coming to Age: The Croning Years and Late-Life Transformation*. In this book she said, “many of us know the feeling of having abandoned some part of ourselves as we’ve journeyed through life;” she continued, those “lost parts of our personalities call us once again into our bodies, into our souls, often deeper into the unconscious than we’ve ever been” (53). Prétat spoke of the child within us that we may need to hold and mother, heal and transform, and she said: “like Persephone, the child becomes a woman and the woman a queen. When she returns the whole world blossoms. She comes carrying the child of the future” (128).

While I cannot be sure of the purpose of these synchronicities involving Frida and Hecate/Hekate in my own life, I can speculate that they are meant to help me find more balance in my life as I imagine embodying these courageous figures, bearing Celtic symbols, with my own “soul flowering,” while carrying the torch of illumination as I educate and nurture myself and others.

I am holding onto the roots, as Marion Woodman said, and branching out as well, finding balance in this kind of “tension of the opposites.”

I am doing more and more things that I never would have thought possible before, such as co-chairing a conference, and joining the Board of Directors for WE LEARN, the literacy network that I have been involved with for many years. I am now able to do these things largely because I have been given more confidence and support from reflections on images that have presented themselves to me in my dreaming and waking life. These figures have “mothered” me, so to speak, as I have found them nurturing. Looking within has helped me to be able to navigate boundaries, and cross thresholds. Images may be represented through words as well as visually.

As a poet and a scholar, it is my hope that I can help inspire others to take time to be more reflective—to see more patterns and make more connections. I want to find even more ways to take this inner knowledge out into the world. I know transformative language arts practices are beneficial ways to do this.

It is my hope to hold a storytelling symposium on our campus in the near future, and anyone who is interested in participating may feel free to contact me. I have participated in such symposiums before, and storytelling is one of the oldest ways to connect with others. Analogy has been called closest to the language of God, and it is a transformative art in and of itself—making comparisons between the known and the unknown to help people understand the unknown better.

Participants share their many storied lives in workshops where they

may exchange and comment upon journals or personal narratives. They may also do presentations of their work in small reading groups, wherein they give one another constructive feedback and encouragement, and some may present work in larger social gatherings or at conferences. I have my students in each of my creative writing classes do research on viable markets or venues in which to present their work.

Conclusion

Just as Brian Swimme, author of *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story*, says he hopes educators will help people “learn how to ‘read’ the universe so that one might enter and inhabit the universe as a communion event” (101), so I want to help people learn to “read” images and see patterns in their own lives through arts-based workshops and studies of the humanities.

To illustrate his meaning, Swimme uses the moon at night as an example, describing how the light of the moon is more than meets the eye—as is the moon itself—which he uses metaphorically, as a representation of wisdom (also Hekate/Hecate—Moon Goddess—illuminates the night sky). Interestingly, when he discusses “false images” in data, and particles “flashing into existence . . . so rapidly that the unassisted eye cannot catch their movement” (102), this sounds rather like Hekate/Hecate at work, with her sometimes blinding light.

Swimme ends this chapter, that he calls the “All Nourishing Abyss” because of the “mystery at the base of being,” with a discussion of the importance of child-like wonder and human curiosity, saying “each child is situated in that very place and is rooted in that very power that brought forth all the matter and energy of the universe” (104). Swimme ends his book with a thought that connects back to the role and purpose of synchronicities in our lives, a greater awareness for what C. G. Jung called the Self, which could be said to be the “God” within—both the origin and the goal—Swimme says:

The consciousness that learns it is the origin point of the universe is itself an origin of the universe. The awareness that bubbles up each moment that we identify as ourselves is rooted in the originating activity of the universe. We are all of us arising together at the center of the cosmos. (112)

In conclusion, I have marked the center of my mapped out backyard garden, as many gardeners do, and I have a stone circle there. Cosmos flowers have even found their way into my backyard garden. However, I have been planning to discover the center of the largest circle that would fit inside the entire property, and place a stone there, as well. Whenever I do this, the stone will certainly need to display a carving of an image of some significance. This image will come to me, in due time. Right now, I am thinking of the symbol for infinity, akin to a figure 8 on its side, but I may enclose this—or some other image—within a mandorla shape as

a frame. According to H. Bierdermann, “mandorla” is an Italian word that it means “almond,” and mandorlas are ancient symbols of wholeness that are made when two complete circles come together and overlap. The mandorla is yonic in nature, having the shape of a vagina. Yonic images have also repeatedly appeared in my life (including the connections with the flowers showing up as Frida’s vagina—and now even with my use of parenthesis for something significant), so it would be entirely appropriate and “soulful” to have this symbol in a prominent place in my garden.

In addition, I have talked with our town manager about a community garden project, which will eventually feature artistic displays of painted tiles that participants have been painting in “soul flowering” workshops where we share stories while we do the hands-on work. We make beautiful connections through transformative language arts. The individually painted tiles each tell their own story, but put together they will form a creative mosaic that will be impossible to ignore. We will include a plaque that will direct visitors to a website, where stories may be posted and recordings may be linked, in connection to the tile display. The original idea for the “Phoenix” painted tile display came about when one of my students lost almost everything—including her own treasured artwork—due to a fire that raged through the center of our town. I usually display one representative tile that is my own creative reproduction of some artwork originally drawn by my eldest daughter (see fig. 10, Appendix).

I would eventually like to hold creative collaborative “soul

flowering” workshops at my own home, and find ways of making something that is usually a private sanctuary open to selected groups of people, such as the adult basic readers I am working with, for the purpose of encouraging more “soulful” reflections, and helping them to garden their own ideas along. I am currently assisting members of WE LEARN to create webinars through which we will help participants get started writing down their thoughts, giving them prompts and examples to use as models. When they have written out a basic essay, we will show them how to review content and learn to better organize it, seeking emerging patterns. I strongly advocate taking time to look within to make those deeper, contemplative, and meaningful connections that are often brought about through synchronicity, as well as to share them with others in productive, encouraging ways—storytelling, singing, dancing, painting—educating others. Finally, perhaps, the most important message I want to share is: “even when we think we are alone, we are not alone.” We have at our core something that will never abandon us. Realizing this is in itself a transformative part of an ongoing process for a lifelong learner.

Appendix

Figure 1. Celtic Love Knots

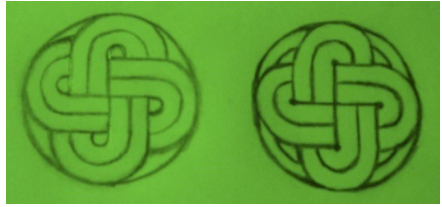


Figure 2. Joanna Becker—My Fair Young Lady

Figure 3. “Reproductions,” (*Glad Wilderness*)

Reproductions —Geraldine Cannon

Mirror, hold my gaze.
Mother me—my face,
my body, my being naked.
My neck leans forward,

shoulders droop from years
of practice hiding height
and small, pointing breasts.
Once, I saw the roundness

of my mother’s body, how
she was made from giving
birth, nursing, stooping
in all those fields. I looked
away and return now
to the image I can bear.

A hand reaches up.
My daughter, still wet
from her bath. I hold
her, loving her skin.

Wrapped in towels, we
brush our teeth, our hair.
We smile and primp, fixing
up each other. I desire no

shame, no jealousy here.
When she says, “Mama,
I wish you had blue eyes
like Daddy and me,” my brown
eyes go white. I see
a tiny crack begin to form.

Figure 4. “Freedom Takes Flight”

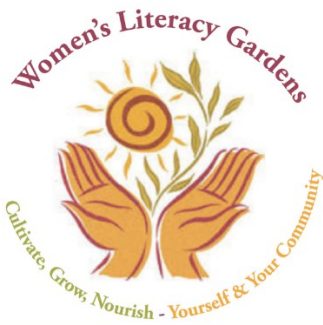
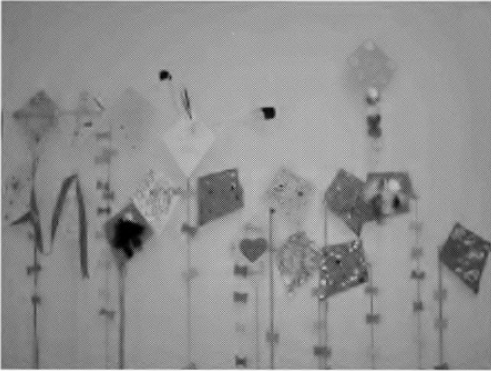


Figure 5. “Women’s Literacy Gardens”
Conference Flyer

2014 (Net)Working Conference & Gathering

March 7-8, 2014

University of Rhode Island
Feinstein Providence Campus
Providence, Rhode Island

Figure 6. Frida Kahlo's Self-Portrait on the Border Between Mexico and the United States



Figure 7. Dr. Terry Murphy, "Frida Under Glass on Satin."



Figure 8.1. “DinoLady,” by Hendrix--
mother/daughter team



Figure 8.2. “Frida,” by Hendrix—
mother/daughter team



Figure 9. Hecate/Hekate—Illuminating
the Night Sky



<http://www.flickr.com/photos/britishlibrary>

Figure 10. “Phoenix” tile,
by Geraldine Cannon
Becker, inspired by Jessica
Becker’s art



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hosted by Blake Library, at UMFK (<https://www.umfk.edu/library/faculty/scholarship/>). Formerly an “at risk” student, she has worked for over ten years with “at risk” learners in women’s literacy group, WE LEARN (Women Expanding: Literacy, Education, Action, Resource, Network), helping to empower disenfranchised women through literacy.

CREATIVE PRODUCTS: TLA PROCESS EXPOSED

Feathers, Daisies, Fish Scales & Words

Sonja Swift

We use stories to understand. Ourselves. The world. The Great Mysteries.

~

Some people think written stories are superior to oral stories. Written histories with dates marked chronologically, legal documents, and treaty agreements also. The misnomer of Columbus' *first* arrival to the *New World* still whitewashes fourth-grade history books. A single accidental, misinformed signature has been enough to merit open-pit mining against the will of locals. All over the world the de-valuing of oral by written has come at the loss of great oral traditions because, sadly, the presumed authority has been backed by guns and ammunition, and so upheld.

I have a deep appreciation for oral storytellers. For the wit and skill and humor it takes to hold an audience captive with the spoken word. For the legend-carriers who pass on stories by re-telling them time and time again, with pauses at just the right places, with a memory for every minute detail. One has to embody the memory of such stories as if they had been lived in person. One has to go into character to tell stories this way.

I am a writer. I'm one who carries a notebook in her back pocket and a journal in her rucksack. And writers too have been threatened with guns and ammunition.

~

Writing, for me, has been a survival tool, like carrying a pocketknife. It has also been a friend, a mirror, and a confidant.

Creativity, in my experience, is not just play. It is part of how we survive as humans, as creative beings.

~

A notebook is an easy thing to throw in the backpack. I carry it with me everywhere. But it's also held me hostage in ways I could never have imagined. In the way outlaws are held hostage by always having to be on the run. Journaling for survival enabled my own running. The compulsion to start afresh each new day and journal my heart out, bluntly, vulnerably and in whatever place or moment I found myself has gone hand-in-hand with my leaping over barbed-wire fences, trailing through pastures, crossing state lines and sauntering into the bustle of another city. It's what I've used to survive. Write down the bones and run like an antelope.

Journaling for expression, for memory-keeping, for recording dreams, for envisioning a storyline, is another thing.

~

When I picked up ceramics again after years of disregarding the artist in me, and only keeping the writer alive through journal sketches and

wayward rambling, I remembered the process of seeing something through. Mud turned to stone. Fingerprints engraved. I molded and carved and fired and glazed and saw each vessel I make go through all the stages. I've taken notes about molding, carving and firing clay. I've taken notes on process.

To see writing through and beyond the flighty notes of each new dawn, each new day, is a bigger challenge than one might think. It's a lesson in slowing down, planting feet on the ground and standing like a tree stands. Rooted. Proud. Ceasing to run goes hand in hand with learning to make a story, to weave it together in full. It is akin to going from chasing fireflies to planting a sequoia in the moist earth and watching it grow.

~

As poet Deena Metzger states: "To write is, above all, to construct a self" (8). It is a journey, a quest, a process "that distinguishes the inauthentic from the authentic self" (45). This is why to write well one must first know oneself, which isn't as simple as it might sound.

~

A peculiarity of our day and age is how washed-over *knowing-one's-story* is. It used to be what bonded people. Origin stories. Creation stories. Clan stories. War stories. Birth stories. It was how people introduced themselves, identifying place, ancestry, clan, and given name, all of which entailed stories. I speak in the past tense generally as there are still many people who live with acute awareness of the role of story in identity, community and land-based relation.

~

Story is symbolic of the bridgework needed today. The remembering required alongside the visioning anew. Old stories can still offer guidance and yet there is a call for new stories also. The most invigorating conversations I've had are when people tell true tales unabashedly. No censors. No attempted politeness. Just plain old gritty truth. The whole story not just the sleek front or distracting shine. The stuff no one wants to talk about, but really they do, they need to. To quote Metzger again: "Every real story is part of the construction of the self, and every real story adds its dimension and wisdom to the collective" (115).

Telling real stories is a form of wisdom keeping.

~

To write about writing is to write about the process of retrieving a core creative voice, what that takes and why it's important.

Loss of one's voice is at the center of traumatic experiences, loss of the ability to tell one's story (Gilligan 221). As Ellie Epp once said to me: "There is a strong relationship with dissociating internally and hiding externally, this is the cost of not speaking one's truth." To recover, to heal, something many if not most of us are in need of today, requires telling our stories truthfully.

~

In Carol Gilligan's book *The Birth of Pleasure*, she writes about witnessing the loss of voice in adolescent girls and five-year-old boys, who

at these respective times in their life and development begin silencing their honest, vulnerable voice, discounting their own uninhibited and innate ability to speak freely. Gilligan writes:

Listening to girls, I saw not only the need for but also the possibility of a new paradigm for conceptualizing human relationships, based on the intuitive, knowing voice that spoke so accurately about love—a voice I also heard in young boys. As I heard this voice discounted by another that cast its perceptions into doubt, as I witnessed adolescent girls begin not to say what they know, not to trust what they say, felt and thought, and heard five-year-old boys voice-over this emotionally transparent voices with a voice that carried the sound of authority, I had the sensation of watching an eclipse. (5).

Black out. A muffled silence. Swallowed words. And so we begin to censor ourselves. Social attitudes can either perpetuate this voice-over or consciously support keeping the core-creative voice intact.

Philosopher Gaston Bachelard calls the buried self our first suffering. He writes: “What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak. It was born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us” (Metzger 193). In a short story called *An Unwritten Novel* Virginia Woolf writes about the buried self that Gilligan speaks to: When the self speaks to the self, who is speaking? asks the narrator. “The entombed soul, the spirit driven in, in, in to the central

catacomb; the self that took the veil, and left the world—a coward perhaps, yet somehow beautiful as it flits with its lantern restlessly up and down the dark corridors “(193).

I imagine a dragonfly, or a ghost.

~

To reach the buried self, the uncensored child, the core-creative voice, and reclaim it isn't an easy thing to do alone. Gilligan speaks of one confiding relationship wherein one is encouraged to speak freely, saying how this offers the best protection against most forms of psychological distress (29). Alice Miller calls this person the enlightened witness.

Validation. Being seen. It makes all the difference.

~

The world of public discourse, though, is not known for its truthfulness. From petty dinner conversations to politicians' overt lying to backdoor negotiations to advertisement propaganda, dishonesty and insincerity have become the norm. As Metzger writes: “When truthfulness is honored, describing the world and describing ourselves are the same act. Creating art and creating ourselves are the same act; art, world, ourselves—these are continuous with one another” (5). Another way of putting it is to say that the lies of big business and puppeteer politicians begin with lies to themselves.

~

Lying, I was told once, is a corrosion of self-trust. “This is very

important,” Ellie Epp wrote to me; “lies teach people to disregard their perception, to not trust the only true guide they have.” Secrecy too is another form of lying, of concealing the truth. Personal transformation is only possible through having courage enough to be true to oneself. And to write well is to write truthfully.

~

In the words of Isak Dinesen: All suffering is bearable if it is seen as part of a story (Metzger 5).

Even if the truth is coarse, it is real. It’s hardy, like wood and metal are, not plastic. There is a desolate kind of beauty to it like the desert at sunset.

~

Metzger describes a moment during a writing workshop she was leading when an older veteran, after sitting quiet finally decided to share something. Something in him cracked open and unfolded. He proceeded to describe how during the Vietnam War one of his friends had been ambushed and killed by the Vietcong and he, lost with rage, abruptly retaliated by giving two Vietnamese children poisoned cookies. Moments after his vengeful act he snapped-to, realizing what he had done. But his cloudy awakening came too late and he watched the children die. This was the first time the veteran had ever told this story. He broke down weeping before the crowd. And then, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, also attending the workshop, and who had himself endured the war, rose, did a full

prostration before the veteran and then held him in his arms until he calmed (Metzger 115).

This is what telling stories truthfully can look like.

~

The language with which people tend to talk about the earth-in-crisis these days is, while factual, also typically aggressive, technical, fear-based, and apocalyptic. The color of wet cement: slate gray. A hopelessness and anxiety, apathy, is what stories of this kind, however accurate, create. And there isn't a lot of power in that. There is enough already of walking by strangers or beggars or neighbors without even a passing glance, much less a greeting.

There are very good reasons, of course, for the severe edge to these outcries. The realities we are up against merits grief and outrage; and yet a litany of hard facts does not make a story. The mysterious complexity of ecosystems unraveling and erratic weather and war refugees, a myriad of rippling consequences in all corners of the globe, isn't an easy thing to quantify. It is a lot to take in and hard to make sense of. It challenges people to see outside their own lives and draw connections across space and time.

~

Laura Sewall prompts us with the following: "here's the skill: in the face of the clearly not so beautiful, we do not look away or unconsciously close in a spasm of denial. Skillfully, we witness" (119).

News headlines with images of war. A homeless man's outstretched hand. Dead dolphins washed up on shore. If the gravity of the situation we are in isn't something experienced somatically then it's hard for people to make it real. Stories told well help make things real because stories told well are told from a place of deeply felt experience.

~

I think the problem is less that of convincing people that we're screwing up and hazarding future generations. Either they know as much or are shackled by the blinders of denial. What is required is coherency—as in coherent persons who do not question our essential interconnectedness.

Dissociation is the opposite of coherency, dissociation means fragmentation, means lack of cohesion, and being dissociated is a direct result of being in some way traumatized. Dissociation creates more dissociation. It leads to the creation of dissociated legal systems and corporate structures and a blindfolded economy. When dissociation becomes the norm this is the world into which children enter and become socialized.

There have to be other ways, ways to get to the core, to the roots of these crises born of dissociation and denial. For the issue is not just corruption on Wall Street or extractive industry irreverence, the issue is deeper and more subliminal than that. It lies in how people deal with trauma and get stuck in cycles of repetition through dissociating, closing eyes, shutting off, silencing the stories that need telling. Stories like we are

all in this together.

~

Theodore Roszak, author of *The Voice of the Earth* writes:

Environmentalists, by and large, are very deeply invested in tactics that have worked to their satisfaction over the last thirty years, namely scaring and shaming people....I am questioning whether you can go on doing that indefinitely...[pushing] that same fear-guilt button over and over again. As psychologists will tell you, when a client comes in with an addiction, they are already ashamed. You don't shame them further. (Louv 146).

So rather than convince, or shame, we are faced with the task of healing some deep fissures in people. It's a task fit for weavers. Writers. Storytellers. We need to mend a tattered blanket of golden fibers and spider silk threads so the fool's train-wreck we're on can't so easily be ignored.

~

Writing can be a powerful form of healing, especially when writing is closely allied with the quest for truth. What makes personal writing and memoir so potent is its honesty, the baring of wounds, scar tissue, saltwater-tears and ebony-bones. I can taste the difference when I expose hard truths on the naked page with fearless honesty. It is liberating. I savor this in other people's writing as well. The nourishment comes from its realness. I drink up this sour nectar. In doses, it is good medicine. Truth medicine.

~

The transformative edge lives in re-telling old stories, calloused and painfully redundant, anew, rather than bumping over the same-old-saga on repeat. When re-told from another vantage point hard stories can free up old pain.

~

Look deeply at your motives for writing, I was advised once, *look deeply*.

~

When we speak or write, we do so from the structure we are in during the moment of utterance. We literally structure each other physically when we speak to one another. The language we hear or read entrains our bodies rhythmically, an entraining that begins when we are infants entrained to our mothers' speech, echoing and vibrating through her womb (Epp).

~

A conversation through correspondence:

SS: I know this [process of reclaiming voice] is not just about writing, it [the practice and craft] is also in how we speak, and whether or not we are present within ourselves when we do so.

EE: Yes.

SS: It feels almost revolutionary to acknowledge the language hemisphere as the indoctrinated and colonized part of our minds, while at the same time using language to decolonize. How does one do this with

grace?

EE: It's the same question as how to write well I think. Writing well is writing accurately about real things. Writing well is about being alert to effects of the language one is using, many of which are quite nonverbal. Always, always fighting use of the junk language around us by refusing it in the moment of utterance when it comes into our heads, as it does.

SS: How do we defend against harmful language in a societal context that has made it normal, not even just normal, but authorized?

EE: By practicing strict self-honesty as a discipline. By being decisive and clear to refuse what feels wrong. By always giving oneself alternative language contexts, like honest friends, a faithful journal, the best writers, or even very high ambitions to write well.

~

It was Ellie Epp who taught me that language must consult non-language trustfully, curiously and bravely, and that the best language is thoroughly in contact with non-language. She wrote the following to me once:

Perceiving, like feeling, is part of nonverbal or preverbal functioning, yes, and language is a bottleneck whose shortcomings (which come from its function as social exchange and therefore lowest common denominator) filter what we think we can know. For people like us, and everybody maybe, what's needed is to be able to shift attention fully into silent attention, as people do when

they meditate or (briefly) when they focus...Realness of state. It shines in the writing. I've found that sex and grief both make strong writing, because of the way they force realness.

Realness. Scent. Texture. Sound. The subtleties and nuances, the aroma, say, of jasmine, the hiss of the kettle whistling. This kind of writing requires sinking into our very human capacities for sensual perception. It's good training for intuition too.

~

This is what *realness of state* looks like:

Six o'clock am alarm buzzes, the sky still dark as midnight, wind gusts scratching away at windowsill, howling like a coyote. We linger in bed chasing dreams, trying to grab hold of nighttime visions.

I rise. Throw on moss green tank and faded blue jeans, tightening rams head belt buckle on thick ocher leather. I descend down creaky stairwell to set Bialetti espresso maker to boil. Florescence illuminates cubbyhole kitchen, windowpane black and wind licked.

He enters the stale, little-used, B & B kitchen while I pour steaming espresso into two porcelain mugs and repack the aluminum vessel with dirt brown grinds. He opens the freezer and pulls off the lid on a spherical icemaker. Peering at crystalized water, he melts the fogged ice dust off with warm finger, and pulls out a perfect sphere. He peers up at me with ice globe in hand and asks if I want to walk to the ocean. I glance at the window, at the blustery dark pre dawn. I say yes, naturally.

We set out with hoods pulled tight and walk briskly into the pressing winds. Raindrops are whisked one-way, gusted another, before splashing to the ground. We walk with a fast and determined gait over mud-slick hillside, dashing over the main road like antelope, to avoid the glare of oncoming headlights. I feel unseen by the morning drivers. Like a wild animal skirting roadways in the last hour of melting night, limber-bodied, agile, and elusive. We find the dirt road that cuts to the harbor and turn down it quick-footed breaking into a brief, excited trot. We brace the winds sideways now, rather than head on.

The sky liquefies a royal blue. Sheep fencing chops up paddocks on either side, a tightly woven tangle of electric wire, chicken fence and barbed wire fencing. Slabs of carved granite stand erect as post-markers interspersed with wooden poles. We've dressed warm to brace the wind and welcome the dawn. The same footpath would be something altogether different mid-afternoon on a calm day, more tame and neutral somehow, less of an adventure, a pilgrims' quest to the shore.

The stars have bled away now, the blue sky fades to silver, silver ebbs to whitewash. Passing the harbor we turn head-on back into the wind, each step an extra effort. We locate the trail cut between boulders that buttress the foaming, white-capped salt water coursing and churning in response to the winds. The path cuts right and we follow, past a tall carefully constructed cairn and to the lip where land meets sea.

I climb atop a stone table and squat down palms pressed together, a

timeworn expression of reverence. Waves curl, the wind tangles my hair. He descends closer to the shoreline, arching his arm back and throws the ice sphere into the ocean. Our effort is now complete.

We know not the time, only that the sky is growing ever brighter, shadows lifting from the land, and that we must walk briskly back to catch our lift to the ferry. The day has surrendered again, the sky broken open. We pay heed.

I am ecstatic. These are the moments that bookend the chapters of a life, they are the times I remember.

~

The state-of-mind in the moment of writing gets imbued in the words themselves. The very essence of one's being in the moment of putting pen to page infuses the words. The structure we are in the moment of writing, although oftentimes subtle, determines word-choice, inspires rhythm, selects topic, and undergirds meaning, everything (Epp workshop). Body writes differently when enraged, when in love, when mourning loss, when enraptured. I know I write better when I'm not just writing on command or peering into florescence sluggishly but instead when I allow myself to relax and let the words pass through me, climbing up and through my foot soles or down my spine, emerging through fingertips plucking keyboard or grasped tight to a pencil's slender frame.

~

Virginia Woolf describes how rhythm goes far deeper than words

and that waiting for words to emerge is like awaiting a wave in the mind, that the job of the writer is to notice the wave, the rhythm, and patiently trail it to shore (Epp workshop).

Ursula LeGuin expresses it this way:

It is better to hold still and wait and listen to the silence. It's better to do some kind of work that keeps the body following a rhythm but doesn't fill up the mind with words.

I have called this waiting 'listening for a voice.' It has been that, a voice.

But it's more than voice. It's a bodily knowledge. Body is story; voice tells it. (238-88).

This is what makes for exceptional writing, writing that channels, emerging from somewhere deeper. This is what I aspire towards when I write, to take the time required to access what I am aspiring to say and, in waiting, find a way to say it well.

~

We change the world every time we open our mouth or put pen to page. We are changing the world all day long through our presence and what we bring our presence to. This is a huge responsibility. It's why when activists take on the high-speed energy of their corporate opponents they boil hot with anger and fall down exhausted. It's why the Dalai Lama advocates compassion even in the face of his homeland being occupied. It's why rereading a letter written in the heat of rage later and before posting is

a wise thing.

~

It is one of the most powerful realizations to reckon that our every thought and emotion, act of belligerence or kindness, song or curse, smile or frown, literally changes the world. What does one do with this knowledge?

Apply it, in every simple gesture. Enjoy, because life responds.

When I walk light-footed and vibrant people on the street smile and greet me kindly. And in turn when I'm cold and angry, stiff and sour, withdrawn, then people, in their own sourness, respond. The light dims. The sewage reeks rather than nostalgically reminding me of Calcutta. I consider the cement suffocating instead of grinning at the spots where tree roots have cracked the sidewalk in steady upwelling. When pausing to write one has the chance to accentuate these things, to call upon attentiveness worthy of being brought to the page.

~

One night in the dead of winter while kicking around the kitchen with mint-tea stewing, my partner decided he'd read aloud a story to pass the time. I propped myself up on the countertop with feet dangling, listening curiously and wondering what it was that had compelled him to pick up this story and what the story might reveal. Written by a favorite author of mine, though he didn't tell me who until afterwards: *The Garden of Forking Paths* by Luis Borges. This is the part that has stuck with me since:

“Sometimes he would tell people “I am retiring to write a book.” Other times he would say, “I am retiring to make a labyrinth.” The book and the maze were one and the same thing.”

I think this is important to remember when writing. Sometimes it’s about the writing and sometimes it’s about the living. The quality of living, the quality of attention to life, makes for the quality of a writer. And then there is the symbol of the labyrinth. To walk a labyrinth is an act of meditation. The difference between a labyrinth and a maze is that in a labyrinth there is only a single, non-branching path leading to the center.

~

I awake knowing I have to write. Knowing I have to free-write with blue ink on a blank page, and see what might come of it. So I blink to from deep and unruly dream-state slumber, exhausted from a night of visions, and dress myself in corduroy pants, a black-and-white striped tank top and red plaid long-sleeve that hangs loosely, casually, wrap a wool scarf around my neck, and pin my tangled hair up so it’s out of the way. I set out.

I walk uphill to the coffee shop. I walk past a street-sleeper with white hair nestled on hard ground under thin polyester blankets and all I want to do is leave a magnolia, freshly picked, nectar-scent strong as day, at his bedside. I don’t have a magnolia, only an image of one, so I bow in quiet acknowledgement, and I keep walking up the hill and around the corner into the cafe.

There are things I sense I have to write about but don’t know it

until taking pen to page. Sometimes writing emerges this way, as a quiet knowing, a whispered request to pause and retrieve what might be floating nearby. Floating in the way dreams float around, sometimes only briefly, thus requiring immediacy in taking note, other times as fresh as the memory of swimming as I did at dusk yesterday, a memory plain and easily retrievable, for I can still taste the salt water and feel the way the ocean lured me in, the way the beer in my veins made it feel warmer than it was, the way I swam fiercely, so fiercely the fog moved in like a tanker and before I knew it I was enveloped in mist. If the call to write is there, I find it best to take heed.

This is what I write of, this is what I find myself writing of without knowing it was what I had to write down:

There is an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean known as Midland. It is the last and oldest of a chain of islands and atolls protruding out of the Oceanic blue. It is the home of the albatross. Those giant white-winged birds that can fly for weeks on end without touching ground. Those journey-birds that travel the world round and round and round.

The albatross mate here, on Midland, they mate for life here, returning to the very same spot on the island to nest and feed their young. They are dying here, on Midland, because the food they come home with is of a substance we humans know too much about. Plastic. Made from crude oil piped up and out of the underbelly of the Earth. Made disposable as if it were a banana peel, which it's not. Bottle caps. Hypodermic needles.

Tampons. Lipstick containers. All that glitters seductively and chokes their young.

I learned about this place from a friend of a friend who has been there to bear witness. A film has been made and I watch it in the window-lit corner of the café and salt-water pools in the corners of my eyes. Tears trace two wet lines across my cheeks because the filmmakers have done what the best, in my opinion, strive to do: weave beauty into the grotesque, the revolting, the helplessly painful matters of life at stake. I am left with the image of a dead, velvet-feathered albatross chick encircled by daisies, honored delicately by the aesthetic of a filmmaker, on an island where every single wave brings in more plastic bottles and micro-trash to a white sand beach.

I sat fireside with friends and colleagues the other night and learned that Mitsubishi honchos, Japanese businessmen, are buying up the last of the yellow finned tuna before it goes extinct. Images of state-of-the-art freezer warehouses and men in suits sipping green tea with calculating expressions filled my thoughts. Images of iridescent tuna fish swimming, shimmering, in an ocean of resplendent abundance also filled my thoughts. Why do people continue banking on death instead of life, I wondered. I continue to wonder.

And just the other day I learned that the Kogi of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in Colombia, a deeply spiritual people who take it upon themselves to pray for a world in balance, currently have access to only two

of their fifty-four sacred sites due to tourism and private development. I want to scream a shrill war cry, a warning cry from the mountain top, because when the albatross are dying from eating plastic, and the yellow fin tuna is going extinct while businessmen freeze its flesh as market commodity instead of spending their profits on saving it, and the Kogi are excluded from their prayer places because tourist resorts are deemed more important, then it's gone too far.

And yet all I've known since being born is a world that's gone too far. Can we circle back again? Can we make whole again? I am inundated with facts as hard to swallow as a bottle cap. I feel sick like the albatross from taking it all in. I forget what I'm carrying around until I name it. Picking out each piece of plastic from an inflamed gut and laying it out in a circle on the table for display.

After my last sip of coffee turns cold and my hand still clutching the pen rests still against an inked-up page I remember that this is why when I am called to write, I write. To mend, to heal, to make circles out of feathers, daisies, fish scales and words.

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Swan

Judith Goedeke

tears can flow where moonlit mountains
rise out of blue water

the heart can finally crack under a sky
flaring orange and crimson and purple

that she is dying reveals itself at last
in the snowy cascades of a swan's feathers

as the earth trembles and breaks apart
the sea sparkles like topaz

The last movement of Swan Lake came over the radio as I drove to tend my sister, who was in the active stages of dying from breast cancer. When that beautiful, painful music swelled around me, I began sobbing so uncontrollably I pulled off the road. I turned the volume way up in order to hear every note of every instrument so I could feel my way into this uncharted water that had finally opened to me. My beautiful sister, the swan, was collapsing in front of me long before her time.

I provided care over months and years. She and her young

daughters depended on me for many things. It was relentless, exhausting and heartbreaking. In order to keep my wits about me over the long haul, I had to stay focused on the immediate task at hand. Looking forward was too painful, too overwhelming. During this time I either slept like a stone or not at all. I lost myself, all my energy was directed outward. My work and personal priorities fell by the wayside and I didn't care. But nothing I could do would change the outcome.

The music I heard that day penetrated a place that was buried, so I could do what needed to be done. I believe we humans have hard-wired shock absorbers, which hold heartache back and release it into ordinary times, in increments that are somewhat manageable. At the time it felt like a sideswipe, but it was a bit of pure grace.

Now 15 years later, I decided to write about Susan. The spacious attention that writing demands brought a gush of images from the shadows and into full awareness. I remembered the blong-bling-blong of her baton, twirling and bouncing around the living room. I saw her in a smart black and white prom dress our grandmother made when we lived in Baltimore in a row house with marble steps. I howled when she took me shopping in her first car, two kids with the radio blasting. She worked as an office temp so she could attend community college; she paved the way for me with our father who didn't believe in educating girls. I saw myself in her wedding in a pink dress with a big matching hair bow. I changed the diapers of all of her babies. I remember when she divorced how she struggled with a new

configuration of family. I spent long, playful evenings with her young daughters while she learned American Sign Language. When she got sick, we giggled over stories we made up together to pass the time in hospital waiting rooms. I remember a parade of visitors delivering casseroles. There was sly pleasure in our inventing rituals to reframe chemotherapy.

Scenes of her living and dying played through my mind, but did not land on the page. So many emotions were swirling and as I named them I felt relief, as if they were simply waiting to be acknowledged. I went on naming them and let myself feel whatever was behind them without distinguishing good from bad. My relief grew.

My intention is to be a wide-open channel of thought and emotion, recorded with exquisite precision. Once it is all out where I can see it, I can begin to work with it more directly. I become something of a bystander as honesty, clarity, new possibilities and acceptance are conjured. These openings are palpable in the architecture of my body and in the soft tissue of my emotions. My new-found peacefulness needed to be recorded quickly, lest I lose it.

I am a poet who puts as few words on the page as possible in order to create a universe. The poem came out quickly. Life and death, joy and sorrow, grief and abundance, all are traveling companions. Couplet form mirrors this co- mingling. The images from nature translate this into metaphors that are compelling and universal. In the end, it may not be any particular aspect of the creative process that is transformative. It may

simply be in mustering the honesty and courage it takes to write, that the spaces between our truthful and holy words become magical enough to heal.

Since the age of 4, **Judith Goedeke** has been in relentless pursuit of truth and beauty. She intuitively knew that these could be relied on when all else failed. She is a former acupuncturist, teacher and photographer. Judith continuously offers Poem as Portal workshops (presented at the 2015 TLA POW conference) to help participants listen more deeply to themselves, chart courses through obstacles, tap into the infinite love within, use their gifts in service and experience more fully the beauty and Oneness that courses through life. She is certain that love prevails and healing is real. Her work appears in many collections, where she fervently hopes it will do some good. *River of Silver Sky* is her first book.

Ending Borders: Emotion Instigates Action

Maiga Milbourne

Access

I

Late at night on the JFK
tarmac, boarded a chartered
flight with nervous families crying
and hugging and there we
were, Havana-bound. Their
grateful relatives lapped
them up, swallowed them
in limbs, and washed them
back onto the island while I
waited under fluorescent lights
for a student visa.

In Vietnam, I fell onto a cool
mattress in a high-rise after staring
with amazement at the tangle

of wires, creating a shower on the
wall, at the open drain on the floor.
No curtain. Just shut the bathroom
door and rinse away twenty-four
hours of journey.

And then the Andes rose up
around me and pooled me into
perspective. Ecuador is neck-strain--
the world is up and up and threaded
with clouds.

II

*Not only can't go back but the
impulse to return to what was
known is quickly tempered
by the hot memories of
what was left behind--*

*She fled refugee camps in
central Vietnam. Preparing
for my trip she was vague about*

the location.

*He is in the US illegally. He wants
to go home, to Ecuador, but
hasn't lived there since she
was a child. Returning means
no work and a total sever to the
life he grew into here.*

III

I spin the globe,
flip the pages of an atlas.
I day-dream of cobble-stone
and salted plums. I
haven't been
turned away
yet.

IV

*You roll eyes over delayed
flights while I have secret*

*nights under open
desert sky.*

*You grumble about stiff
legs in airport seats. My
fingers lose sensation
as my gaze constantly
looks up for searchlights.*

*You see endless blue from
plane windows and I
see endless blue around my
raft, knees to chest, clutching
my baby photos.*

*You ask to land on time
and I ask for land.
For time.*

My parents first traveled with me when I was six months old. There are photos of me posing as the storybook character “Heidi” in Switzerland at four years old. Travel has been a big part of my life-- being a traveler is one of the treasured aspects of my identity. It’s also a way I’ve been

politicized as an adult. Exposure to poverty, clearer perspective on interconnected economic and political systems, has galvanized me to be pro-active in human rights campaigns in the US and abroad.

“Access” was written in reflection of my ability to travel practically unencumbered as a white, wealthy woman with a US passport. Given this orientation, I’m curious about probing what travel means to different people. As a white woman with almost unlimited access, I want to start conversations with other privileged white US citizens about the implications of our presence at home and abroad.

I had my first experiences of culture shock in Zambia and then Cuba. In each instance, local citizens directly questioned my ability to travel in their neighborhoods, while they had nowhere near the same unrestricted movement and capital to sustain it. At first, I was shocked and defensive. This was some of the first politicizing and reconciling I did around issues of white privilege and access. *When I was able to relax my own emotional response to privilege, I was able, to a degree, to gain some context about opportunities I’m afforded that many are not. These initial conversations prompted this examination and I thankfully have had access to classrooms, activist skill shares, a canon of reading on white privilege, race, and citizenship, as well as engaged friendships to further this inquiry.*

In Cuba, I was an exchange student with a student visa. I was overwhelmed by the quick intimacy of Cubans. At home in the US, I’m accustomed to being in public places with anonymity. I can get lost in my

own thoughts on the walk to work. I might sit with a book for hours in a cafe. In Cuba, the same walk was quickly accompanied by someone just passing by, recognizing the markings of my “foreign-ness,” compelled by their own friendliness and curiosity. Craving my accustomed anonymity, after months of these constant conversations, I began asking to be left alone. Inevitably, my new friends would challenge me. “You can come here but I cannot go to the US. Why should you be able to come here and observe? And I can’t even ask you questions? Have a conversation?”

They were right. They were my teachers.

Still an avid traveler, I had conversations with friends about their home countries of Vietnam and Ecuador. Hoping to tread with sensitivity and compassion for their journeys, so beyond the scope of my experience, I watched a distance gather between us. These friends were rarely very forthcoming.

I still travel regularly. I stay aware of my ability to move around the globe. My hope is to remain open to other’s experiences and an ally to those disenfranchised. In reality, it’s never quite so simple. My travel is laden with privilege. My presence, anywhere, means something.

As a white woman with a US passport, and wealth by global standards, I’m working to be accountable. In my own art and writing, I feel compelled to grapple with questions around race, citizenship, and privilege. I want to write in gratitude to my teachers at home and around the world, and also to white people with US passports and wealth, to open up

conversations on justice and accountability.

“Access” fluctuates between past and present. I wrote it quickly, reflecting on some of my own travel experiences and what friends have told me of theirs. Traveling in Vietnam was particularly laden. As I write in the piece, I have a friend who fled Vietnam after a few years spent in a Refugee camp. I also spoke to many friends who had been deployed to Vietnam during the war. I experienced Vietnam as a tourist, conscious of these varied experiences within my own community.

Soon after a trip to Ecuador, I met an activist who works for the rights of undocumented immigrants. I’m grateful to know her and for her work. We’ve had a few brief conversations about Ecuador, again highlighting the polarities of our respective exposure to this country. I feel guilt that I could casually spend a few weeks where this woman has deep roots. Until US immigration policies change, she cannot even visit Ecuador without losing his ability to live in the US. This invites questions of why she left initially. The US has had a long presence in Ecuador, mining large swathes of the country. US corporations have been responsible for environmental and economic devastation, while their home offices in the US benefited mightily. We see similar patterns in other parts of the world, noticeably from countries affected by NAFTA and CAFTA.

In conversation with many other white people of similar means and access, there’s often a reluctance to consider privilege, ethnicity, and citizenship. Many white people write or say they’re afraid to talk about these issues because they might come across as racist or xenophobic. My sense is that the best way for white people to gain self-awareness,

individually and collectively, is through these challenging conversations. Being wrong. Being corrected. Being transparent. And being aware. My hope is that my art in some way contributes to this larger dialogue and orientation. Remembering ourselves. Being conscious of where we are and who is being denied.