

# Chrysalis 2015

## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

The original second issue of Chrysalis from 2015 was lost, and not all of the documents could be recovered in their originally published state. Some documents are missing altogether. The Letter from the Editor is one of those documents. In the original letter I wrote, along with two new editors on my team, Sandy Hennenberger and Lisa McIvor, I gushed about creative processes. I had recently given birth to my daughter and was in the post-partum bliss and sleep deprivation stage of motherhood. I had also recently learned that my perfect baby had a lot of life threatening food allergies, and many I couldn't figure out as well. I was about to give up my editorial position to focus on my baby but the two people who stepped in to help run the journal needed significant support and training, so I decided to just go ahead and manage the journal one more year. It was a blessing in disguise.

Working with others, learning how to delegate tasks, organize and communicate clearly my vision and goals, and to lead a team, has changed my life forever. The skills, tools, and lessons I learned in becoming a managing editor are invaluable to me, and I am grateful for Sandy and Lisa: for their patience with me in my learning process, for their effort and hours, and for their good strong hearts and willingness to contribute something meaningful with me for the TLA community and the greater

population of folks interested in how the language arts creates lasting change.

In the original letter I wrote, I also thanked all the talented and committed volunteers who read and commented on our selected submissions to help this journal be a real community collaboration of minds and hearts. I cannot recall all those wonderful names presently that worked in this issue now, years later, but the impact of those folks is felt and appreciated.

There is a wide range of TLA modalities and expressions represented in this issue. Some of them will make you cry, some are shockingly good. Please browse them all and read the ones that call to you, read them deeply. Write a response or a reaction and email it to us at [editors@chrysalis.org](mailto:editors@chrysalis.org). We would love to hear about what you've learned or thought or felt about the pieces we publish. We may even publish your response!

## Table of Contents

### **THEORY:**

Finding Our People in a Ceremonial Village Disguised as a Conference: A Short History of the Power of Words Conference by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg/ 4

Poems That Heal by Sandy Henneberger/ 31

### **NARRATIVES**

"I Am Who I Was, But So Much More" by Sarah W. Barlett/ 46

Watercolor Words and Release: Poems of Surrender by Wendy Thompson/ 77

### **CREATIVE PRODUCTS: TLA PROCESS EXPOSED**

Triptych: Etch-a-Sketch Icon, Crayon Litanies of Faith by Ramona Anne McCallum/ 86

Enduring Witness—A Transformative Play by Hilton Koppe/ 93

The Screen Door Unlatches: A Chapter by Masha C. Harris/ 142

**THEORY:**

**Finding Our People in a Ceremonial Village  
Disguised as a Conference: A Short History  
of the Power of Words Conference**

*Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg*

**Finding Our People:  
A Short History of the Power of Words Conference**

“I have found my people here.” Over the years, dozens of people have told me this at the end of their first Power of Words conference. Bringing together our people is what this conference is all about, but starting and sustaining an annual conference requires a group of people willing to journey through uncertainty, confusion, financial losses, awkward moments, surprisingly bad timing, and a whole lot of work to create and hold a place where our people can gather.

That's what I always envisioned the Power of Words (POW) conference as: a clearing in the woods, a gathering place on the prairie, a shelter in the storm. TLA, unlike anything you can spin into a sound bite or put on a fortune cookie's slim piece of paper, is both basic and complex. Explaining to people how it's all about “social and personal transformation through the spoken, written and sung word”—as we do for the MA in TLA at Goddard College—is like pointing to your friend and proclaiming, “Good

person who will change your life!” The specific is the way to the universal in any strong poem: describe a ginkgo tree as “billowing fans of dark tree tripping up the sky,” and your reader can enter into the moment with you and find a new way to relate to many manner of tree. Invite someone to sit at a picnic table with you and six others on a dewy September morning, talking about what matters most in our lives, and that someone can land on innate resonance in his/her/their body and soul. In this way, TLA invites us to use the language arts—whatever we create alone and together with words—to convey, explore, question, and deepen what we know of ourselves, our communities, and the world.

Unless people have experienced with TLA coalescing community and meaning, it's hard to fully comprehend the full possibilities of TLA as a profession, community, field of study, and calling. The conference, in a nutshell, is a a kind of ceremony village where we can do and live TLA, drawing from writing, storytelling, theater and other forms of TLA both in planning and holding the event, and at the event, investigate, question, discover, and celebrate many forms of TLA for many peoples.

### **Bioregional Roots, and One of the Biggest Blackouts in History**

After the Transformative Language Arts MA program began in 2000, I began to see the need for some kind of TLA gathering, one in which people who are studying, practicing, exploring or otherwise living

TLA could find each other for greater inspiration and information, but also to grow TLA beyond one small college program. While there are many events—conference, symposiums, workshops—in related expressive arts, movements, and practices, there were none that I could find that brought together people drawn to language as a transformative art across the spectrum of individual and cultural change.

From my decades organizing and participating in Continental Bioregional Congresses, I came to this task somewhat hard-wired to seek structures and supports that helped make the conference more like a ceremony village in which we live out TLA, finding ways to integrate along the way what we're discovering. In the bioregional movement, we adapted the term “ceremonial village” to connote a gathering in which making a transformational and communal space—through ritual, art, and community-building. In such a space, the emphasis shifts from only networking and information-sharing to encompass helping participants find their own best truth, practical wisdom, and language for how to live in greater balance with the earth.

Translated into the Power of Words conference, this ceremonial village shifted us away from an event focused on participants receiving knowledge and toward greater possibilities for participants integrating, questioning, and revising what they're learning to construct their own deeper knowledge. To move this direction, I knew such an event would do well by adopting some of what we do at the week-long bioregional

congresses, such as talking circles (sometimes called clans), in which a small group, no more than seven people, gather each morning to share what we're experiencing, and the questions haunting or holding us without others interrupting or trying to fix us. I also imported the congresses's structure to some extent with space for interest groups, open time for readings or performance, and integrating what we believe in--the power of words aloud and on the page--into how we organize the event.

In 2002, I took my ideas to Goddard College, which happily agreed to host the conference and support my time doing the organizing for a conference in the summer of 2003. It was clear to me then that it would be ideal to start the conference at the college, where we had the advantage of a physical place where we could host the event and an academic program (the MA in TLA), but eventually it needed to be the project of a TLA not-for-profit organization so that the conference could eventually bring together many organizations, institutions and individuals focused on TLA to cross-pollinate. In turn, the conference, with somewhere over 60 people attending regularly, could also help fund a not-for-profit TLA organization.

Our goals that first year at Goddard were modest. We hoped for 30 people to come learn about and experience TLA, and I invited Gail Johnson, the first TLA graduate, and an astonishing playwright who used her art to bring her Washington Island community (off the north shore of Wisconsin) together to tell its story and history in poetic monologues. Sherry Reiter, poetry therapy pioneer, was also one of our keynoters. We

set the conference for mid-August, 2003, just as the Goddard residency for the Individualized MA program, which TLA is part of, was ending so that students could stay for the conference, and we had others interested in TLA coming, mostly from the northeast.

You could say the inaugural conference was both charmed and cursed. Our timing coincided perfectly with the blackout of 2003, which wiped out electricity in seven northeastern states and Ontario, precisely all the places most of our participants were traveling from to come to us. Vermont was charmed electricity-wise, and Gail was still able to get here (she had landed before the blackout, which affected hundreds of flights), but Sherry was stuck in Brooklyn. We still had a spectacularly-TLA time together writing, telling stories, sharing vignettes and skits, and in general, finding there was a hunger among and beyond us for this kind of gathering, even and especially as darkness surrounded our light.

### **Finding Grace and Holding the Space**

By 2005, the conference had picked up steam and participants, including a curious young man, Callid Keefe, and his fiancée, Kristina Perry, both Quaker traveling ministers who approached us before the conference to offer their services in “holding the space” as a work-study offering. They wrote me one of the most moving and articulate letters I've ever received about the power of sitting in silence on the edge of a room



while big groups meet, and helping hold the sacredness of the space we make together. Not being a fool, I said yes and couldn't wait to meet them.

Callid and Kristina did indeed do this magical work for us for a number of years, introducing themselves at the opening session, then sitting quietly, eyes closed, breathing in the psychic and physical space we inhabited for opening and closing sessions, presentations by keynoters, and important meetings. Their work was remarkable: just having them there brought many of us a sense of peace, a feeling that we were being cared for collectively.

Callid went on to be our coordinator for four years after initially sharing the position with Kristina, and for the last two years, he's serves as chair of the TLA Network's governing council.

We didn't just find Callid and the grace of holding the space; we also found grace, or Grace Paley to be more precise. In 2005 Grace, one of our foremost American writers and activists, was to be our keynote speaker. Since she lived down the road, it seemed like an easy deal to get her to the conference, but making the arrangements was complex. The first time I called, I spoke with her husband, Bob (Robert Nichols): "Is Grace there?"

"No!"

"Do you expect her back soon?"

"No!"

"I wanted to ask her to be the keynote speaker for our conference."

"She won't do it," he told me, but he also said I should call back on

Sunday night.

I did. She wasn't there. I called again, and this time left a phone message. A week later, I tried again. Bob answered, "Wait, she's in the tub, I'll hand her the phone." I ended up called back later that evening, and for the first time, spoke to her.

"I would like to go back to Goddard," she told me. "It's been a while. But I don't know if I'm going to be on the Cape with my daughter and grandson that weekend. Call back in a month." I did. She still didn't know. Call back in another month. By this time, I had her number just about memorized. She still didn't know.

About six weeks later, just as I needed to finalize the program, she told me that she knew she had to give me an answer, but what should it be? She said she felt terrible about putting me off. In the background, I heard Bob yelling, "Just say no, Grace! Say No." Grace paused, then said, "You know what? I'm going to do it."

From that point on, I called her about once a month just to visit a little, see how she was faring with her wild schedule that brought her all over the country and beyond to give readings, speak against the war or meet with students even though she was well over 80 and was dealing with a recurrence of breast cancer. At one point, I mentioned to her that I also was a breast cancer survivor, and although she was actively going through treatment and tests, she instead focused her voice on me, "Oh, Sweetheart," she said, "what did they do to you?"

The night before she was to speak, I figured it might be good idea to make sure she had the details handy. So I called. Bob answered and said she was out of town and couldn't do our conference.

“She’s old, she’s not feeling well. How can you think she’s going to be there?” he said. He told me that I was a little crazy for thinking she was my keynote speaker.

We ended up doing a tribute to Grace—planned in a hurry by novelist Katherine Towler, journal therapy pioneer Kay Adams, and storyteller Meg Gilman—but right before we were starting the tribute, Grace called me and said, ““I can’t believe I fucked this up.” At the end of the tribute, during which time we read some of her stories and poems, and told stories about her, one of the conference participants stood up and said, “I didn’t know Grace Paley before this, but now I realize we are all Grace.”

A few hours later, Goddard faculty Sara Norton and her husband Joseph Ganza, who had shown up for the tribute and were also close friends of Grace and Bob's, left us this message: “We have Grace and Bob, and we're coming to the conference.” With 20 minutes, we gathered everyone in the haybarn theater, and soon Grace came in. Everyone sprang to their feet, some of us rushed up and hugged her, and people clapped, called out her name, and cheered as she sat down.

She glowed and yet was so utterly down to earth, a small woman on a folding chair who said in a Brooklyn accent untempered by years of living in Vermont that she could answer a few questions. Someone asked her

about the war, and she told her of her hope for the world because people came out all over the world and protested the Iraq invasion before it happened, the first time, she reminded us, there's ever been this kind of response to try to stop a war before it started.

Patricia Fontaine, a student and Vermonter, stood up and reminded Grace that recently in a speech she gave, she said her favorite word was "then."

"It still is," Grace told us, demonstrating through her presence (as well as her previous absence) how a story can seem to be over, but then – just like in Grace's stories, just like in real life – something else happens.

### **Reaching Out to People of Color**

I've been in many rooms over the years where everyone was white except one or two people of color who were often cajoled into participating so the group could tell itself it was diverse. I've been part of organizations in which an African-American woman or Latino man is recruited to head up the diversity committee as if engaging with a wider spectrum of ethnicities, races, and nationalities is the work of whoever isn't in the mainstream ethnicity, race, and nationality. I've also been schooled on what's wrong with this picture: how it's pretty much inherently racist to bring in a person of color to fill a slot or solely burden the work of recruiting more people of color. Such actions, even if they come from a

place of truly wanting to address racism in our culture, can easily result in the organization only giving lip service to overcoming oppression.

Having people of color so visibly part of our conference is a foundational way to communicate that TLA comes from a long history in many cultures—the oral tradition in the African-American community, poetry as path to spirituality and community in many Latino cultures, mythology and songs in many Native American traditions. It's inherently multi-cultural, and for us to be true to TLA, we must be true to engaging diversity

Shortly after the first Power of Words conference, I consulted Yvette Angelique Hyater-Adams --president and CEO of a culture change management consulting firm, and a writer and facilitator who earned her MA in TLA at Goddard College. Yvette had tremendous experience in helping organizations and businesses seriously start walking their diversity talk. Looking back on our many discussions over a decade ago as we forged a diversity plan for the conference, Yvette recently wrote me,

I'm always thinking systemic change when I work with people wanting to create diverse and inclusive communities, institutions and groups. Changing the status quo requires strategic thinking and deliberate action. Reach out and pull in the right people to 'sit at the table' to build a plan and learn together. Pay attention to the power dynamics. Make sure silenced voices are present. People of Color and women need to be in leadership roles and not just be the

“teachers to others” on the ways they are silenced in social systems. Historically dominant voices need to be at the table too—Whites, Men, Straight, and Abled-Bodied people. Take a look around the community and notice who is there—and notice who is not there. Invite them all to co-create, heal, and grow as individuals. Yes, let us use the written, spoken, and visual word to do this! This is work of TLA. It begins with individuals who have the audacity to be vulnerable with each other, learn something, take collaborative action, and end up changing their part of the world.

In seeing who was at the table—largely middle-aged white women, although we always drew good representation from the LGBTQ community— and who wasn't, we explored how to invite in more than the usual suspects while, at the same time, working first through Goddard College, and later the TLA Network, to facilitate the organizing committee as a whole working on this issue. Our plan included four main components, which we've worked to realized over the years:

- ┌ Ensure that at least half of our keynoters be people of color,
- ┌ Provide scholarships for people of color who need financial assistance (which Yvette ended up funding for many years with the Roxanne-Florence fund, named for her grandmothers),
- ┌ Reach out to communities of color to invite them to propose workshops and attend the conference, and
- ┌ Invite people of color to participate on the organizing committee.

In recent years, we've seen a more diverse conference come into being. For our 2010 conference, S. Pearl Sharp –a dazzling poet, actress, and multi-genre performer – was able to access an additional fund for people for color, and between our outreach to many organizations and individuals, and the Roxanne-Florence fund, people of color composed over a third of conference participants.

Five years later, the 2015 conference will feature many people of color as presenters and keynoters (in fact, all the keynoters in this case), and we can see the effect of a more diverse community spilling over to other parts of the TLA Network. The new certification the TLA Network offers, an introduction to TLA, has attracted a good balance of people of many races, ethnicities and ranges of life circumstances. The council, the governing body of the TLA Network, has several people of color intimately involved in the organization. Our online classes are drawing in diverse audiences although we do tend to draw an overwhelming amount of women (Men, come on over! We welcome you!).

Yet we still have a long way to go in some respects. Our conference organizing committees have tended to be mostly white. Most of the online classes the TLA Network offers are, thus far, taught by white women. Some of our conferences could have done much more to extend invitations and make connections with communities of color. It's a complex deal to figure out how to reach out, who to reach out to, and how to best bring

together diverse communities, especially when many of us doing the outreach have the privilege of not facing frequent racial or ethnicity discrimination, and may, at times, be blind to our own blindnesses.

Speaking for myself, it takes vigilance to not fall into complicity or quota-filling, but to keep returning to the mysterious ground of listening to people who experience culture differently than I do. I know I've stumbled at times, not done enough, or wasn't clean enough with my motives, but TLA is also about immersing ourselves in difficult dialogues, ones in which we don't always know what to say and need to learn to listen in new ways.

### **The Magic of TLA in Performance and Conversation**

We've had a commitment from the get-go to not only invite in presenters of color, but also a broad spectrum of people who write, tell stories, do spoken word, create plays and collaborative performances, sing and make music, and do any number of things with words to catalyze enduring change and healing. We also aim for a mix of keynoters—at least one person who's relatively well-known enough to draw in participants along with others who should be recognized. For instance, in 2007, David Abram, award-winning author of the life-changing *The Spell of the Sensuous*; Allison Adele Hedge Coke, Native American poet, writer and storyteller; Nehassaiu deGannes, playwright and actress; Taina Asili, activist singer-songwriter; and Devora Neumark, installation artist who, at the time, was



hauling her entire living room set out to a public plaza in Montreal to invite people to sit and have conversations with her in public. Here are some moments from the years that broke my heart wide open for the better:

- [ Rhythm and blues singer-songwriter Kelley Hunt, at the end of her performance at Goddard College in 2010, left the stage, still singing with all her heart, as she backed up through the audience that was giving her a standing ovation.
- [ When I was introducing David Abram, I explained how, when he moved to Lawrence, KS, I wanted to get to know this extraordinary writer of what it means to be wildly part of the earth so when I heard he was sick, I would go to his house, leave a container of soup and bag of crackers at the door, ring the bell, and back away slowly, just like I would when trying to befriend a wild animal. Before I could finish the story, David emerged from the back of the packed haybarn theater, stepping out of the shadows to wild applause. He then talked from his heart, integrating the sleight of hand he used to befriend shamans around the world in a commons of magic.
- [ Gail Rosen, a fabled storyteller and founder of the Healing Story Alliance, told riveting stories of finding meaning after surviving the Holocaust through sharing the life of Hilda Stern Cohen, a story she went on to publish as a book, integrating into it her own stories of seeking healing through the spoken word.

- [ Tom Janisse, editor of Kaiser's *Permante Journal on Narrative Medicine*, brought himself along with four physicians to present extensive workshops on how writing, for healing professionals and people living with serious illness, is its own enduring medicine.
- [ Gregory Orr, poet and writer, read from his then new collection of poems, *Concerning the Book Which is the Body of the Beloved*, while reflecting on how poetry saved his life after, as a child, he accidentally killed his brother in a hunting accident.
- [ Kao Kue, a Hmong poet, singer, and spoken word artist, sang, spoke poems, and told stories while using the Hmong flower cloth making tradition to reveal how layers of stories are stitched together to create a community story of her people re-inventing their lives after escaping to the U.S. from Laos during the Vietnam War.
- [ Jen Cross, who leads writing workshops for people reclaiming their sexuality, particularly people in the queer community recovering from sexual assault, at the 2014 conference spoke to a packed room about self-care, inviting us to write our way into radical self-care as part of how we change the world.
- [ Scott Youmans ignited such a passion for right livelihood at the 2010 conference at Goddard College that the small group that attended his workshop demanded that the workshop go on, so Scott soon offered one of our first online classes on the topic of “Making the Leap and Knowing When You Are Ready.”

- [ Taina Asili, solo and with her band, exploded onto the stage with songs of freedom and justice, harkening back to her Puerto Rican roots and weaving into her performances stunning poems that speak to the generations lost and the generations to come.
- [ Dick Allen, poet laureate of Connecticut, came with his marvelous poet wife Laurie to our 2013 conference to share his wondrous poetry. When I told him of the oldest beech tree in Pennsylvania, he wanted to see it, so we trekked through the woods to behold the splendor of this ancient beech tree.
- [ Greg Greenway, a kick-ass singer-songwriter in the tradition of folk, blues, gospel and more, not only performed breathlessly powerful shows at two of our conferences, but he jumped into helping run sound for other performers, and helped with whatever needed heavy or light lifting.
- [ Jimmy Santiago Baca not only keynoted at our 2012 conference (and he'll be back for 2015), but he participated fully in every session, cheering on especially the writers and storytellers who publicly shared their work for the first time. Every meal, I saw him talking passionately and listening deeply to conference-goers in the wonderful dining hall of Pendle Hill, the retreat center where we met in 2012 and 2013.
- [ Julia Alvarez was who I called when, two weeks before the 2008 conference, our main keynoter backed out on a whim. I knew she

lived in Vermont, and it turned out she could not only come but was willing, based on our budget and more based on what we were about and how much it meant to her, to show up for far less than her fee. Introduced by fellow Dominican Republic poet Marianela Madrona, she presented one of the most stunning talks I've ever heard on the power of words.

### **From a Conference to a Network**

By 2004, there were enough people interested in creating a not-for-profit organization that we began figuring out what to call ourselves, eventually settling on the TLA Network because our mission entailed helping people find each other, enhance our mutual ways of practicing TLA, make a living doing TLA in our community, and grow TLA in our individual and collective lives. Angels emerged out of thin air: Bill Beardslee, a minister and educator from New Hampshire, stepped in to draft by-laws. Scott Youmans, one of our early TLA graduates from Goddard, helped design a website, and went on to serve as our coordinator for a year and then as our council chair. Alexandra Porsi, a gifted designer and TLA graduate, made her a logo and a lot of the art for the first incarnation of the website. Deborah Seidman and Nehassaiu deGanges co-chaired the first wave of the organization. Lynn O'Connell led us through the maze of incorporating as a not-for-profit organization, and by 2005, we

had our non-profit status.

The conference was still part of Goddard until 2007 while the TLA Network developed a council model of governance in which we make our best decisions out of our highest collective wisdom, and always hold a no-shame/no-blame policy without lessening a commitment to accountability and communication.

In 2009, we moved the conference from under Goddard's auspices to TLAN's for several reasons. One was that the college was not set up organizationally to support an annual conference as much as a smaller, more nimble organization could do the work. Another was that I was simply wiped out from seven year's organizing the conference, supervising staff people at the college from far away, and all on top of my other Goddard and community work. Mostly, we moved the conference to be part of TLAN because the timing was right. TLAN had enough of a financial base to hire a coordinator to help with the conference, and the conference had enough of a participant base to support that hire. One of the coordinator's main jobs is to hold and organize, with a strong local organizing committee, the conference, and to devote her/himself to helping us get out the word on TLA, the conference, and the TLAN, mostly through word-of-mouth, social media, and occasional ads, printed materials, presentations, and media contact.

Over the years, our organization has grown, hit some walls, worked our ways through, learned a great deal about how to work together from a

distance, and landed on this realization: any organization worth its salt must be in a state of continual experimentation to figure out the best way to proceed, improve its processes and offerings, and seek resilience and innovation. To this end, we're now immersed in strategic planning led by storyteller and organizational consultant Laura Packer, and we're still learning how to make community together, using TLA to grow TLA in the world.

### **Going Upside Down and Right-Side Up Again**

Early on, organizational consultant Lynn O'Connell, who we had the good pleasure of having on the council for some years, told us that small organizations can be wily and flexible enough to survive economic downturns if they have multiple streams of revenue. We took her advice seriously, and also, because we knew TLA needed more than just a conference, we planned for on-line classes, membership, and some grant-writing. We just weren't able to implement all these ideas quite in time for a bit of big-economy collapse.

Largely dependent on volunteers and only on a staff for less than 10 hours/week, we weren't in a strong enough place to weather the economic downturn of 2010. Our last conference at Goddard in 2010 showed us that people just didn't have the moolah to trek to Vermont, and our attendance went from a high of over 100 or about 50. After our soul searching in

person and on the phone, and thanks to the expert financial planning of our treasurer at the time, Suzanne Adams, we found our way out through fundraising among those drawn to TLA, launching our first on-line classes, and cutting back on coordinator hours to less than five hours/week for a year. We also decided that perhaps we needed to do the conference every other year, and started the One City One Prompt project, which supports transformative language artists leading a workshop, class, discussion, performance or storytelling session in their home communities on a common theme, then sharing video, audio, and writing from that session through a collaborative website. One City One Prompt seemed at the time like a good substitute activity for a conference, one that could foster more local events.

Around the time we would have had a conference, we realized that sheesh, we really needed a conference! There's no substitute for face-to-face contact, so we started organizing for the 2012 conference, and decided to try holding the conference near an easier-to-fly-to-location, Philadelphia. We booked the 2012 and 2013 conferences at the serenely beautifully Pendle Hill, a Quaker retreat center just outside of the city. Because Callid and Kristina had worked there in the past, we had a very smooth transition to this sacred wonderland of lushness and peace (yet close to the Philadelphia airport).

Then we found out that being around a big urban center, plus some wild weather, didn't necessarily make for a well-attended conference. In

2012, our conference turned out to be the same weekend as Hurricane Sandy, which translated into 20 or more people not being able to attend, hardly any “walk-ins” from the surrounding urban area, and a bunch of us needing to fly out early. Four people who stayed Sunday found they had to continue on at Pendle Hill for four more days until air travel was fully resumed, but by all accounts, they had a beautiful time writing, wandering, and watching the news with the Pendle Hill staff.

In 2013, our conference numbers dwindled even more because we set the conference on Columbus Day weekend, unbeknownst to those of us on the organizing committee as a major holiday in Philadelphia. There's also so much going on in that city, and without people who lived there organizing actively for the conference, it was hard to get out the word on why this conference matters. We realized at that moment that we needed people on the ground, who lived in the area where the conference was to be, for all future conferences.

A few weeks before the 2013 conference, knowing we were going to be deep in the red, Callid, who was finishing his time as coordinator; Deb Hensley, who was beginning her year in the role; and I talked about what to do. I proposed that we moved the 2014 and 2015 conferences to Kansas City, a good-sized urban center, obviously centrally located, and close to many people in the Midwest who wanted to participate in the conference for years. We agreed on the leap, and put together a plan to fundraise up one side and down the other while also enjoying the 2013



conference thoroughly and finding great meaning with whoever came.

Meanwhile, we ended up having one of our most powerful conference ever with the 39 people who came. There was such intimacy and deep sharing that each moment felt lit up to me and many other participants. As if that wasn't enough, two people—Jaydn McCune and Stan Stewart—fell in love at the conference, got married the next summer, and co-presented at the 2014 conference together.

Crawling out of the economic loss (something like \$9,000, but who's counting?) from the 2013 conference took over a year to fully recover from, and our Campaign For New Stories, that raised over \$6,000 to retire debt and build the basis for TLAN to increase our coordinator hours (not up to 10-15 hours/week) so that the whole organization can grow.

We did, and the 2014 conference, at Lake Doniphan near Kansas City, drew over 110 people, many of whom fell in love with TLA. It also re-energized us as an organization, and brought a young woman named Teri Grunthner to us. A drama therapist in training with extensive organizational, facilitation, and TLA gifts and skills, Teri was the perfect person to bring in as the next TLAN coordinator after Deb's other part-time job went full-time, and she needed to step down from TLAN.

In the last year, Teri has helped us develop all manner of tools and approaches for a better conference, but colorful google forms for people to fill out to find roommates to a streamlined way for our workshop proposal

committee to evaluate proposed workshops. We've also found better ways over time to keep our focus on what draws people to the gathering place of the conference, and what we can offer them beyond the conference.

### **The Path Widens**

TLA offers the promise inherent in witnessing each other's stories and being witnesses to anyone who wants to speak, write, sing, perform or otherwise use language to name and claim what this life is and can be. The Power of Words conference continues to broaden its ceremonial village reach. In recent years, we began reaching out to people in the disability community, people living with serious illness, youth, and to some extents, veterans.

At the 2014 conference, I invited some of the Turning Point writers living with serious illness—metastatic cancer, Parkinson's, M.S., fibromyalgia—to give a workshop on writing through debilitating and sometimes deadly disease. Turning Point, where I've facilitated writing retreats since 2003, is a balm in the desert and not-for-profit organization that offers people ways to foster the healing, wisdom, and community that can help them, their families and communities through times of serious physical illness. For some in this group as well as several other conference participants who navigated disability or illness, just coming to a conference like ours was an opportunity that usually, because of health or lack of

income, passed them by. Thanks to scholarships and support people, our conference included people who rolled as well as walked.

Something else happened at the 2014 conference that grabbed my attention too: we have a handful of teenagers who moved many of us, including an 18-year-old young man who sang us the Beatle's "Blackbird" as he strummed and we sang along, and the next year, in the closing circle, said he loved the conference and everyone here. Our organizing committee for the 2015 conference—about 20 of us who live in Lawrence, KS and the Kansas City metro area—started talking about how to open the door wider for youth. One of our people, Kelly Hams-Pearson, did a lot more than talk: she wrote a grant that was funded by Jackson County Family Court Children's Emergency Fund. Over dozen Kansas City teens ages 14-17 are coming to the 2015 conference; some are in the foster care system, diversion or treatment programs, but all have one thing in common: they love writing.

We also are beginning to make greater inroads in reaching out to people with disabilities and serious illness. There are other populations we will lean toward in the future as we continue to widen the path we make by going forward, one conference after another.

One of the most powerful passages in the old testament's Book of Ruth in which Ruth tells her mother-in-law Naomi, "You are my people." In the wild weather of our climate—the earth, the world, the political, economic, sociological, psychological and all other manner of climates—the

Power of Words conference offers people who resonate with the power of the word (out loud, on the page, sung, whispered, shouted or told) a place to belong, and good company for the ride our work, art, activism and lives.

## Resources

### ***Power of Words Conference:***

1. Power of Words conference: <http://TLANetwork.org/conference/> and on Facebook:
2. Conferences Since 2007: To see a discussion of each conference from 2003 onward, please go to <http://TLANetwork.org>, hover over “Past Conference,” and click on the year you would like to see.
3. Blog posts on the conference:

<http://seemareza.com/power-of-words-conference/>

<http://wisdomwithinink.com/2013/10/14/to-taste-life-twice-processing-the-power-of-words-conference/>

<http://carynmirriamgoldberg.com/2010/09/27/power-of-words-brings-me-home-everyday-magic-days-69-71/>

<http://carynmirriamgoldberg.com/2009/07/07/power-of-words-conference/>

### ***Transformative Language Arts:***

TLA Network: <http://tlanetwork.org>

Goddard College's MA in TLA:

<http://www.goddard.edu/academics/ma/individualized-master-arts/transformativ-language-arts-concentration/>

*The Power of Words: A Transformative Language Arts Reader*, edited by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg and Janet Tallman:

<http://www.tlanetwork.org/resources/tla-reader/>

*Transformative Language Arts in Action*, edited by Ruth Farmer and Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg.

<http://carynmirriamgoldberg.com/2009/07/07/power-of-words-conference/>

**Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Ph.D., CPT** is the Kansas Poet Laureate 2009-2013, and the author or editor of over books, including six collections of poetry; *The Sky Begins At Your Feet: A Memoir on Cancer, Community and Coming Home to the Body*; the novels *Miriam's Well* and *The Divorce Girl*; a non-fiction book *Needle in the Bone: How a Holocaust Survivor and Polish Resistance Fighter Beat the Odds and Found Each Other*; and she is editor of the Kansas Notable Book award winner, *To the Stars Through Difficulties: A Renga in 150 Voices*. Coordinator of Transformative Language Arts at Goddard College, where she teaches, Dr. Mirriam-Goldberg leads community writing workshops widely, and with singer Kelley Hunt, Brave Voice writing and

singing retreats and presentations. She makes her home south of Lawrence, Kansas with her family. [www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.com](http://www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.com)

## Poems That Heal

*Sandy Henneberger*

...And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,  
a remote important region in all who talk:  
though we could fool each other, we should consider—  
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,  
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep,  
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—  
should be clear, the darkness around us is deep.

~ William Stafford, “A Ritual to Read to Each Other”

Following an inner voice: a long-standing writing practice, as I record inner voices, or silent images, has helped me to develop resilience. Starting around junior high school I wrote, and drew, a lot. At that time, it didn't occur to me to think much about what I was seeing with my mind's eye, images of non-understood, often perplexing feelings. By college, short, fragmentary drafts of poems appeared in every notebook, even workbooks for inorganic chemistry.

In the last few years, I discovered that I could reopen this part of my life, to rediscover what I wanted to write. Looking over old journals,

some images or short narratives seemed to leap out at me. For poetry, I followed a technique of revising which I call ‘slow sculpture.’ Cutting words from a rough draft poem or story could change it remarkably. In a given poem, if I recast it from the point of view of a different speaker to ask, ‘what is the *rest of the story?*’ the answer was usually intriguing. The habit of engaging nature reentered my writing life. I began to trust that free writing outdoors, accepting whatever line of thought occurred to me, could lead to a poem. All creative expressive arts enact a healing practice. This is especially true for the personal lyric, which expressive the writer’s inner thoughts and feelings.

Gregory Orr explains how writing a personal lyric can specifically help the writer to confront and process trauma. Through sensory detail “*which clings to embodied being,*”(29) this type of poem provides a space ‘outside’ the writer’s body-mind, to deal with emotional pain.

First Orr discusses the poet’s survival of trauma, in his case, his long, difficult recovery after accidentally killing his own brother, many years prior, when they were teenagers. When he first began writing, the poem-writing act “liberated the enormous energy of my despair and oppression as nothing before had ever done. I felt simultaneously revealed to myself and freed of myself by the images and actions of the poem” (Orr 9). A writer ultimately translates his “experiences with disorder,” his self, his “whole being, into language where it can dramatize and re-stabilize itself in the patterned language of the poem.” (Orr 29). The personal lyric can provide



a sense of order, mending, to the writer and to anyone who engages with reading the poem later. The writing process itself, of poems that enact “disturbing but vitalizing disorders”(79), can help the writer survive trauma. As an example, Orr notes a poem by Emily Dickinson, in which the speaker describes the ability of pain to stop any sense of time passing, putting “a vast, subjective agony in its place” (70).

Pain—expands the Time—  
Ages coil within  
The minute Circumference  
Of a single Brain-- (Johnson 967)

This poem could also enact the traumatic effects of physical as well as emotional pain, throbbing, coiled within the survivor’s body, pushing against the inner sides of the brain.

Another short example is Margaret Atwood’s  
You fit into me  
Like a hook in an eye.  
A fish hook  
In an open eye.

The speaker’s ability to see, and her sense of self, “I,” are metaphorically pierced, through a violent image of physical damage. The pain of love and connection turned destructive, abusive, is embodied here, vividly.

Next, Orr explores how a poetry writing practice can help a writer begin to thrive, or to transform trauma by helping him imagine a new self,

or even a shattered self who somehow isn't totally obliterated. Orr compares poems of this type to masks created by Iroquois "dreamers" of the False Face society. Through ritual and ordeals, the dreamer/ mask carver, once he puts on the mask, can tap into a "radical freedom," a "new identity...animated by positive, healing energy" (121-122). A writer can enact analogous transformations through writing a lyric. As one example, Orr discusses Tadeusz Rozewicz's poetry, written right after World War II. Traumatized by his war experiences, through his poem "In the Middle of Life," Rozewicz "dramatizes his post-apocalyptic struggle to create a new self and new world of meaning" by telling over to himself common item after item, a necessary effort to rebuild world and self with and through language (127-130). But the speaker ends by affirming the greater importance of relationship, with nature, himself, and other people. I focus on the opening and closing stanzas:

After the end of the world  
after my death  
I found myself in the middle of life  
I created myself  
constructed life  
people animals landscapes  
  
this is a table I was saying  
this is a table....

\* \* \*

the sky was silent  
the earth was silent  
if he heard a voice  
which flowed  
from the earth from the water from the sky  
it was the voice of another man.

This is the paradoxical, ‘obliterated self’ speaking, “after my death,” laboriously cataloging the world as it comes into view. He begins to catalog what may be memories, “that man who is picking up an apple / is my father” (128). Next, the speaker begins a tentative reconnection with present-day people, and with nature as he catalogs old woman, garden, tree, water, moon, birds, sky. In the final stanza, still within a silent world, the speaker hears a voice (instead of just himself thinking or talking) that flows from the natural world. “(I)t was the voice of another man,” closes the poem. This voice arises from a self the speaker doesn’t identify with yet, a new self that emerges through trauma, through personal obliteration of ego: this is the barest beginning of thriving.

A second example is Jane Hirshfield’s “The Bell Zygumunt.”

**The Bell Zygumunt**

For fertility, a new bride is lifted to touch it with her left hand,

or possibly kiss it.

The sound close in, my friend told me later, is almost silent.

At ten kilometers, even those who have never heard it know what it is.

If you stand near during thunder, she said,  
you will hear a reply.

Six weeks and six days from the phone's small ringing,  
replying was over.

She who cooked lamb and loved wine and wild mushroom pastas.

She who when I saw her last was silent as the great Zygmunt mostly is,

a ventilator's clapper between her dry lips.

Because I could, I spoke. She laid her palm on my cheek to answer.

And soon again, to say it was time to leave.

I put my lips near the place a tube went into  
the back of one hand.

The kiss - as if it knew what I did not yet - both full and formal.

As one would kiss the ring of a cardinal, or the rim

of that cold iron bell, whose speech can mean "Great joy,"

or - equally - "The city is burning. Come."

Poetry-writing as a healing practice can offer a story that allows  
writer and reader to imagine the traumatized self facing death, feeling dead,

or being metaphorically dead, yet somehow still alive, on the verge of remarkable change, beginning to sense possibilities for a new self. Some poems like “The Bell Zygmunt” focus on the desolate place where life-to-death change starts. The speaker in Hirshfield’s poem identifies with her dying friend, can’t help but imagine how she herself could be the one lying near death in the hospital bed. At the same time, her “full and formal” kiss on her friend’s hand signals that her body knows before she does that her friend’s transition toward death is underway.

And yet, the line, “you will hear a reply,” links the poem’s other sound-images to imply two sorts of change: a bell’s physical sound that metaphorically changes to announce the friend’s life-to-death transition, and a metaphorical bell that may also ring changes beyond death. If we note all the sounds from the poem’s start—human touch, kiss that creates a physical “sound, close in... almost silent,” then “thunder... you will hear a reply,” then “small ringing, /replying was over”, then the bell shape-changes to the “ventilator's clapper between her dry lips--” her friend now become the Bell Zygmunt--then another kiss, then finally all versions of the bell are again referenced. At the poem’s end, the bell--her friend—is ringing with simultaneous great silence and thunder: "Great joy," and, simultaneously, "The city is burning. Come." Disaster, death, and paradoxical joy of release, all at once: Come, witness this. The last two lines gave me chills before I understood the poem. Like the speaker’s body, my body knew, absorbed the “reply,” before I did.

As far as continued thriving, "part of poetry's core activity...is to make visible what Jung called the shadow life," whatever is being neglected by the individual and culture (Hirshfield, Bolick "Interview"). Hirshfield notes that modern life neglects a life of genuine connection to feelings. In addition, I note that trauma often flattens a victim's emotions almost entirely. The process is involuntary: trying to blank out violent, negative feelings, we inevitably lose connection to almost all feeling. At the same time, the trauma survivor is often also numbed bodily and mentally as well as emotionally.

Creative writing can awaken feelings that were buried beyond conscious awareness. When writing poetry, I have noticed such emotions surfacing, especially in the early days of recovery, a process that Orr calls the poem revealing the writer to himself (9). In general, my poems also enact larger, deeper perceptions than I usually notice—the Shadow life!--not only of 'unknown,' repressed, or neglected feelings but also thoughts, insights, better ways of coping, being, relating. The list is long. Sometimes a poem offers a significantly different, wider perspective as well. I think we begin, stall out, begin again, continue our transformations again and again, never for all time.

Some moments of learning to thrive are less dramatic. Aside from revealing intense, disturbing moments, poetry can enact more mundane moments and experiences, somewhere on the path toward thriving: reconnection (again) to embodied feelings, deeper perceptions, and

widening perspectives.

Sharon Olds displays an understated courage in contemplating what is actually happening, in the experiences that inspire her to write.

### **The Winter After Your Death**

The long bands of mellow light  
across the snow  
narrow slowly.

The sun closes her gold fan  
and nothing is left but black and white—  
the quick stream of my breath, the dead  
accurate shapes of the weeds, still, as if  
pressed in an album.

Deep in my body my green heart  
turns, and thinks of you. Deep in the  
pond, under the thick trap  
door of ice, the water moves,  
the carp hangs like a sun, its scarlet  
heart visible in its side.

This poem could continue as a low key landscape of winter forest. But Olds turns to her inner, bodily landscape, and everything changes: “Deep in my body my green heart/ turns and thinks of you.” Everything in the

poem, before and after this threshold line, now becomes an image of deep, mostly frozen grief. Last, trapped under ice, “water” moves sluggishly, suspending the speaker-fish: “the carp hangs like a sun, its scarlet/heart visible in its side.” Shocking in their unexpected impacts, green heart, scarlet heart, are embodied in the cold, water-suspended carp. The sudden appearance of colors implies life stirring in spite of deep grief, depression. But the speaker doesn’t tell us whether the fish’s heart is beating. The change from vivid green to scarlet seems to signal a traffic light, go, stop. I immediately wanted to look up whether carp could survive this kind of cold. That is the question of the whole poem, can the speaker survive this loss.

And yet, the setting sun, leaving all colors bleached to black and white, utterly unmoving as if the entire landscape holds its breath, is offset, very slightly. Immediately juxtaposed to barren black and white is the fish underwater, *which the speaker can’t see, literally*, by now. The picture is so vivid, we see it. The imagined water, underneath the “dead,” “still” landscape is moving. Learning to thrive unfortunately means dealing, straight-on, with loss and grief; this poem helps a reader (and no doubt, writer) imagine beginning to move through those experiences, beginning to move out of being “trapped” in loss, the thick ice of depression. Olds’ speaker is making progress through a difficult survival.

A discussion of thriving would be incomplete without mentioning poems that enact the freedom, the enlivened life, that begins to emerge,



seemingly out of nowhere, even in everyday transformations, as Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

Ah, not to be cut off,  
not through the slightest partition  
shut out from the law of the stars.  
The inner –what is it?  
if not intensified sky,  
hurled through with bird and deep  
with the winds of homecoming.

This short poem layers metaphor within metaphor. Following Hirshfield’s insight that the act of perception *has* to include the human perceiver, I think that lines 4 and 5, “The inner—what is it?/ if not intensified sky,” connect the central metaphor of a human’s inner life to his vivid feelings out in nature, within the natural-world sky, intimately connected. The poem is a prayer or wish, “not to be cut off” from this “intensified sky” relationship. The speaker feels intensely alive and wants to continue the experience, while feeling something flying, “hurling through” his awareness. The physical winds-within-sky signal the speaker’s feeling of profound “homecoming:” his ‘ordinary’ insight and vivid awareness of relationship.

A latter event on the healing path of thriving is learning to live with an open heart, awake, ready to greet experience as it actually happens. That is a tall order! Jelaluddin Rumi in poem after poem persuades us to embrace our own bodily sensations and emotions, our confusing lives, to

open our hearts to joy, “where everything is music.”

**Where Everything is Music**

Don't worry about saving these songs!  
And if one of our instruments breaks,  
it doesn't matter.

We have fallen into the place  
where everything is music.

The strumming and the flute notes  
rise into the atmosphere,  
and even if the whole world's harp  
should burn up, there will still be  
hidden instruments playing.

So the candle flickers and goes out.  
We have a piece of flint, and a spark.

This singing art is sea foam.  
The graceful movements come from a pearl  
somewhere on the ocean floor.

Poems reach up like spindrift and the edge  
of driftwood along the beach, wanting!

They derive  
from a slow and powerful root  
that we can't see.

Stop the words now.  
Open the window in the center of your chest,  
and let the spirits fly in and out.

Rumi celebrates the lucky ‘falling into place’ transformations that creative practices can bring, especially the “songs” of performance poetry. The poem ends with the speaker’s central insight: he asks his audience to “open” their hearts, allow connection to their bodies and emotions. Significantly, the speaker first announces, “Stop the words now.” That must happen first, and connects this poem to mindfulness practices. Then, opening the heart also opens “a window” of perception that “let(s) the spirits fly out.” Here, “spirits” link to the spiritual life, through enthusiastic celebrations--physical/ emotional spirited music, dancing, singing, creative arts—embodied joy. Poetry can enact embodied joy, part of a thriving spiritual path.

“Poetry’s role is to help create and hold a realm of experience...a place where the thinking of the heart, mind, and body come together”

(Hirshfield, Bolick “Interview”). I notice that the above poems also narrate a process of awakening. Above all, poetry can help us wake up.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy...

For it is important that awake people be awake,  
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep,  
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—  
should be clear, the darkness around us is deep.

~ William Stafford, “A Ritual to Read to Each Other”

As I described my journey, I found myself contemplating the unknown in several senses. First: perplexing feelings and associated images, rather than just events, often motivated me to write poems. Second, healing developed outside of awareness; one challenge has been to learn to recognize positive changes. It is a challenge to accept slow, sometimes backwards, progress; this non-linear journey involves a lot of turns and glitches. Over the long term, I am learning to support my writing: making times to write, to rest, to connect with other people. One challenge is to remember and then to act on nonlinear experiences that surface--to allow the unknown.

I find it remarkable, and delightfully ironic, that in 1972 Margaret Atwood ended her serious, logical outline of four victim/perpetrator stages with a disclaimer: “there may be a fifth step for mystics. I don’t know, because they tend not to write books” (40). This in spite of her novel, *Surfacing*. I also love the fact that when two summers of training failed to

teach Brenda Peterson in *Living by Water* how to sail, her friend said, “Close your eyes. Can you feel the wind?...Now, follow it.” (41). In a lot of ways, as I stumbled about, that is what I have been doing my entire adult life, following a felt sense of the unknown.

### Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *Selected Poems of Margaret Atwood 1965-1975*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Bolick, Kati. “An Interview with Jane Hirshfield” and “The Bell Zygmunt” Sept. 18, 1997. Accessed July 7, 2017.  
<<https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/bookauth/jhirsh.htm>>
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas Johnson. New York: Back Bay Books, 1976.
- Olds, Sharon. *The Dead and the Living*. New York: Knopf, 1984.
- Orr, Gregory. *Poetry as Survival*. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2002.
- Peterson, Brenda. *Living By Water: True Stories of Nature and Spirit*. New York: Fulcrum Publishing, 2002.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Ed. Stephen Mitchell. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Rumi, Jalal ah-Din. *The Essential Rumi*. Eds. Coleman Barks and John Moyne. New York: HarperOne, 2004.
- Sandy Henneberger was editor and section editor for Chrysalis, 2015-2016. [She is a Goddard TLA graduate, currently submitting a chapbook of poems and is working on a new novel.

NARRATIVES

## "I Am Who I Was, But So Much More"

*Sarah W. Barlett*

Commentary and writing samples from *writing inside VT*,  
a weekly writing and community-building program  
for women incarcerated in Vermont

"I am who I was, but so much more." So wrote an audience member at the October 2013 public launch of [HEAR ME, SEE ME: Incarcerated Women Write](#), a compilation of unedited poetry and prose from Vermont's incarcerated women. These words speak to the power of the written word to change lives – those of writer and listener alike. As much as the formerly-incarcerated women's writings might have helped them return to their communities, this unlikely reunion – coming together in Burlington VT from all parts of the state to read from their just-released book – stunned listeners by the unexpected impact on their own lives. Barriers dissolved; understanding increased; generosity flowed and gratitude was mutual. This essay addresses the purposes and core practices of *writing inside VT*, the five-year-old writing program exclusively for Vermont's imprisoned women writing for self-change and community-building; and

shares the work of three long-term writers as markers along their paths.

### *writing inside VT*

When co-founder Marybeth Redmond and I conceived of *writing inside VT*, we outlined a few simple goals. Primary among them was to offer writing as a tool for self-exploration and growth to the women in Vermont's sole women's prison. A close second was the dual opportunity to model much-needed pro-social behavior through the closely structured way we run the weekly groups; and to use the weekly experience to create a community of trust as a model for positive change going forward. The specific practices and impetus for this work arise directly from the long-established core of [Women Writing for \(a\) Change](#)<sup>TM</sup> (*WWf(a)C*). I have been an active member of this creative writing community since 1993, and was licensed in 2004 to bring *WWf(a)C* to [Vermont](#). *writing inside VT* is an independent offshoot, with funding awarded us through association with a local fiscal agent, [Vermont Works for Women](#), with whom we share many similar goals and values for the women of Vermont.

Both Marybeth and I were long called to work with marginalized populations of women, specifically to support their written truths as a vehicle for personal and social change. Incarcerated women are among the most vilified of groups. When men end up in jail, women take care of the children. But what happens when women are jailed? They are blamed and

castigated for abandoning their children, who often become wards of the state when grandparents or other family members are unable, unwilling or unavailable to help out. By the time these women enter prison, they already carry the weight of years of abuse, poverty, addiction – and now, the loss of their most cherished achievement, their children. Close to 95% of Vermont’s incarcerated women suffer from substance abuse problems; 88% experienced childhood abuse or domestic violence; fully 80% are mothers. Most were silent before they got to prison, silence being the only apparent way to survive the horrors of their lives. Within our ‘inside’ circle, their silence begins to fall away, revealing the women they truly are absent the rap sheets’ histories. In supporting their own truths through writing, we encourage self-understanding so that future choices are made with awareness; so that they may return to their communities as assets, not burdens; so that they may walk out heads held high and voices tuned to change.

### **Our Practices**

In reality, what we do appears simple. What is not seen is the extensive grounding work on the part of the facilitator who holds the center, usually seamlessly and always consciously. Those grounding practices include the hard work of understanding our own shadow selves so that we do not project them onto others—shadows that can include blame,



presumed motivation or other assumptions. We have learned to hold disparate energies around the circle, to stay present, to address with transparency what concerns the greater health of the whole without empowering a disruptive individual.

In the weekly circle, we do not inquire what brought a woman to prison. We do not speak to a woman's choices with moral judgment, nor to her writing with scorn. Instead, we lift up what is strong and powerful in her experience. As Nelle Morton says, 'we hear one another into speech'<sup>(1)</sup> with honor and respect for each woman's experience. Within the circle we are equals. The facilitator shares the same depth of emotion as felons. We make ourselves equally vulnerable and as a result, generate deep trust. By showing up consistently, even when conflicts keep writers from the group, we have proven our reliability.

Each week we read through a set of roughly a dozen 'circle agreements' forged over the years. These combine best circle practices (e.g. 'what is shared in the circle stays in the circle,' and 'we neither compete nor compare') with guidelines around issues that arise from 160 women living together in close quarters (e.g. 'check your issues with one another at the door'). In essence these are the same agreements that govern *WWJ(a)C* groups on the outside. What is striking, however, is the degree of honor and integrity with which these agreements are manifest and maintained inside. In effect, the group ends up self-policing members who stray from the safety of defined parameters. Routine is very important. We follow the

same structure week after week. What changes is the theme, the prompts, the interactions. Even the composition of the group is variable. Women come and go from the facility; sometimes they are too tired or depressed to participate; sometimes news from home is too hard to bear. But we show up. We run each group the same as the previous one. We never falter in our unflinching respect for each writer, from the most illiterate to the most presumptive of publication. In the process, we become a community of journeying women, writing through loss, healing, and self-discovery.

There is little opportunity in prison for self-expression: materials are limited, instruction is rare, support and encouragement are not part of the culture. Women are made to feel hopeless and powerless. With no decision-making ability or privacy, they are forced instead to conform, lacking personal definition or distinction. Yet research shows that expressive creative activity stimulates positive feelings and self-esteem; that beauty enhances mental health and wellness. With over three-quarters of the women suffering mental health issues, this is critical work. Due to poverty and educational levels, many have never had the opportunity to experience the arts. Creating something with their own hands is stimulating and healing, gives focus and value. Their writing has shown how hungry they are for affirmation, opportunity, expression; and how writing itself has boosted self-esteem and confidence, pushing their awareness into new territory.

Each *writing inside VT* circle ends with us inquire about the gifts and

challenges of the evening's experience for each individual. The responses are written and anonymous. Over the years of the program, we have gathered hundreds of these comments – from weekly participants as well as those attending our readings, both inside and out. Not only do they help us keep a finger on the 'pulse' of the group – they also function as a kind of informal evaluation of how the program is impacting the women.

We have worked for five years with a core group of about six women. An additional eight or ten per session change frequently such that we have worked with over 200 individuals to date. Sadly, all six 'founding' group members cycled back into prison after hopeful release within these same years. Yet, upon return to prison, they have a receptive space in which to retreat, to nurse their pain and to focus more fully on their behavior and choices. They are never judged, but always shown that change is an option. And for most of that original group, release has ultimately taken a more permanent form as their confidence builds, and their lives begin to take on a shape recognizable as healthy and productive. In some cases, their families (having followed their progress via our blog posts) reunite with them, giving them the support and consideration they so desperately need. In others, it is often a greater sign of growth for them to cut ties with the family that brought them to this life of pain and poor choices.

### **The Arc of Experience**

In working with women in prison, I have observed a phenomenon I like to call the ‘arc of experience.’ This refers to the phased responses and behaviors a woman passes through in an ‘idealized’ prison sentence in terms of her transformation across time. At first, she is self-absorbed and filled with generalized anger. Anger at the system, of course; but more, at the individual(s) with whom her involvement led to imprisonment. More times than not, it is a male friend or lover who has persuaded her to become involved in a crime. Perhaps her car held a trunk load of drugs and they were stopped crossing state lines for what she had been told was a vacation. Her car, her charge. Or a drug high urged her to obey a powerful man who promised protection and love in exchange for carrying out a robbery. At this early stage, a woman’s writings may contrast the terror of prison with memories of a kinder past. Or the rage may find its roots in a past of unspeakable pain and despair just now finding its way to the page. For the very first time in many of these women’s lives, they are truly heard as they share their lived *experience*.

Since about 80% of women in prison get there along paths lined with drug and other addictions, the early months often involve simply getting sober. The initial period of intense expressions of victimization, anger and resentment can last months to years. But at some point, the weekly practice of sitting together in a space without judgment, where authenticity and accountability are highly valued, a woman’s tone begins to shift. She begins to see past her immediate feelings of betrayal. She begins

to think about those she has hurt – for about 85% of female inmates, this means her children. As *reflection* time extends into months, our shared writing and listening creates witness to one another’s growing understanding of self. This phase can lend itself to writings of deep faith and hope for genuine change, a new chance. What starts as empty words often leads to deepening belief in self, and in change.

By the time a woman is preparing to leave, she has (ideally!) had time to process her crime, her responsibility to self and others. In our writing circles, this manifests as responsibility to the group and its values, and is seen and heard in the growing confidence and depth of her words, her voice in speaking her truths. In the book *HEAR ME, SEE ME: Incarcerated Women Write*<sup>(2)</sup> we followed this arc into a third phase we called “*collective insight*.” One of our weekly practices is the creation of a ‘found poem’ from lines shared in a previous week’s circle. This is a practice I have used for nearly 20 years now in my ‘outside’ work, weaving individuals’ words from around the circle into a unified whole. It is truly an experience of the whole being greater than its parts. The women love hearing their words come back to them in new form each week. In part, hearing their words in a combined writing tells them which ones ‘found good ears’ – it is a form of validation and appreciation. In part, too, the collective insight of the combined words produces a profound teaching based on the theme of the week. Heads nod approval as murmurs of recognition and delight often accompany the reading of these found poems. Hope comes alive before

our eyes. Belief in self manifests.

### **What I Have Seen and Heard**

One of our weekly practices is to end each writing circle with written comments that reflect the participants' experience of the session. Typically these are in the form of a both/and; for instance, 'what were the gifts and challenges for you of this evening's group?' Or 'what did you give and what receive tonight?' As a result of the fact that we transcribe these every week – and have for five years – we have hundreds of testimonials to the transformative power of the writing group and process for individual growth and change. Among responses received from our earliest group: "I came to this group and learned my words affect everyone. I never knew what it was like to really be heard, to be listened to." Thus the stage was set for a deepening into self, writing to prompts about trust, love, mothers/mothering, intention, fear, hope. We wrote about our lives before; about things we carry and want to put down; about dreams and lack of support and ways to make better choices.

If there is an arc to the 'inside' experience, there has also been one to the overall experience of *writing inside VT*. Women came fearful, shy, shamed; desperate to find a voice, angry, violent; and over time, found self-compassion, care for one another as women with similar needs and feelings. Women grew in confidence as their words became stronger

mirrors of their true feelings. Their sense of connection with one another and belonging to a greater purpose in their lives – to a community of striving – became manifest in their written words.

### **Three Writers**

I have chosen three women to illustrate the value of writing to their journeys through and beyond prison. The first of these, Stacy, was maybe 19 or 20 when we first wrote with her. She was angry at everyone, her words poison arrows shooting outward in every direction. Before long, her background started to come forward:

### **Innocence Destroyed**

*I had sex long before I ever started my first period...*

*I was selling crack before puberty took place...*

*My mind was grown long before my body. My mind was worth more than what I had between my legs. I learned the hard way. At 14 I was an adult. I fucked like a grown woman and I paid bills like a grown woman. All my innocence stolen from me. I didn't see it that way then. It was what had to be done. We had to eat, rent was due...*

*My puberty was a transformation from innocent to guilty. My eyes were opened to the harshness of the world. No more dreams, just nightmares. No childish hopes, just pain and screams. A little girl gutted at her seams. A woman emerges. Cunning and*

*ruthless, the product of her environment.*

*Childish innocence and immature dreams seem so far away. Puberty spent in prison. Her transformation into a woman took place behind the fence. What kind of woman did she hope to be?<sup>(3)</sup>*

She was fixated on the man for whom she had sold drugs and would have done anything. And did.

*Just 'cuz you say [I love you] doesn't make it real. It's the first time in my life I've actually understood. Actions speak louder than words. You love with action, not words. Every punch I took, I still got back up and loved faithfully. Every time I stared down the barrel of a gun wishin' he would just take my life, take my pain and embarrassment, it was me holdin' on. Me causin' my own pain.*

*The fist used to represent love to me. If I could make him that angry to hit me, he must love me. That was my way of takin' responsibility for his actions. Makin' love out of hate<sup>(4)</sup>*

It was to be several years, two re-incarcerations and his ultimate death before she came to terms with the stranglehold he had on her. What a coming of age Stacy's prison years have been.

Before she was released the first time, she wrote and spoke endlessly of her feelings of responsibility for her young nephew, her obligations to a dysfunctional family who depended on and destroyed her



simultaneously. She believed she was strong enough to hold everyone – including herself – together.

### **Afraid to Leave**

*I'm not afraid to stay.*

*I'm afraid to leave.*

*I'm not afraid to put myself in a position of possible failure;*

*but I am afraid to place myself on a path to success.*

*Fear runs deep in my heart. No matter what way I turn,*

*I'm not meeting someone's standards.*

*I know my life is gonna be hard, but I'm confident that I can do this.*

*That I'll be OK.*

*I just wanna go home.*

*I'm tired of time.*

*I'm afraid to be on my own in a place I don't know. With people I don't know.*

*My pride gets in the way. I'm afraid to ask for help. I'm afraid to be rejected. At least at home I know the area, I'm more comfortable. If I need something I can ask for it.*

*Without shame. And without fear.*

*I'm afraid I'll never get to spend time with my nephew. Or my mother.*

*I'll be caught up in my own life, then it will be too late.*

*I'll live a life of regret because time is precious.*

*I can't get back these years; and I can't give them back the time I took.*

*The foundation of me was weak. But now is strong.  
It can never be worse than it already has been<sup>(5)</sup>*

That didn't last long. With all the pressures of her previous life crashing down on her and the need to support the household, she returned to what she knew. Including re-incarceration, consumed in darkness and self-hate.

### **Cracked Heart**

*Heart cracked. Split. Old. Dead. Self-inflicted wounds. Every groove life's struggles. My burdens deep within the channels. Hidden in the cracks. My channels carry secrets and lies no one should know. My years are young but my heart is old. If you counted all the rings, that's the lifetimes my heart has seen. I thought age and pain would allow me to love. But my heart no longer pumps love, but pumps hate instead. It's not red and warm. It's not a cozy place to be. It's grey, cold and ugly. Filled with lifetimes of truth. Filled with history, filled with past. It is no longer light with life. But heavy with death.<sup>(6)</sup>*

At the same time, she wrote poignantly of the system that in no way helped shape her to be strong or proactive. She desperately wanted to find another way to become.

### **Trying to Birth My Adult Self**

*Six years of empty time trying to find myself, trying to birth this so-called adult version of myself... And I've yet to birth "the me" I'd like to be. Six years of labor... only to have an emergency C-section... Ripped out of the version of myself. Violently and unwillingly. I wasn't ready to meet the world as anybody, not me, not the adult version, not any version of me. Six years to realize my whole life was built on a foundation of lies. Six years only to recede back to those lies...*

*To fail or succeed, I don't know what's worse. I'm forced to endure harsh truths and soft lies. My chest is full of rage. My womb, full of hate. Self-hatred, then hate on a much larger scale. I'm broken, but not in a good way, not in a conformity way; in a "fuck everyone" way, in the "fuck myself" way. In the "watch me rebirth a monster of myself" way... If six years didn't change me for the better, how much more time will it take before "they" realize time ain't the answer... I don't want the world to meet the monster in me...<sup>(7)</sup>*

She wrote more deeply through a LOT of such harsh, bleak, and self-incriminating loathing during this final incarceration. As a result, Stacy came to express less raw anger and rage, less self-blame and disgust, and even a glimmer of hope for a future that would take her into new territory, absent the family she now could see as holding her to old, dysfunctional dynamics:

*Hope is a function of struggle. I've hoped for 22 years and nothing makes sense. Hope is at the heart of every struggle. It's the only way you make it out to the other side. Sometimes hope feels like a lie. I hope, but still I'm in the struggle.*

*And the worst kind of struggle. One where you try to convince everyone else who you are. I'm tired. When will things change? Seems like hope might not be enough to make it through<sup>(8)</sup>*

Today, Stacy is living in the community but not with her family. Without intact role models or a built-in support system, she has had to reinvent herself from stage to stage. True to her writing, she has learned that hope is not enough, just as earlier she learned that love is not enough. She now has a job and still hopes to attend college, the dream she wrote about so many years ago when we first met her. It has been a long struggle and is far from over. But she has moved on from the clutches of a charged sense of maturity that stood in for her own lived life.

Raven didn't write with us as long, but was devoted to the group and bold with her words. When she first joined us, we heard a lot about her estranged mother (who also vented via the [writing inside VT](#) blog when Raven's words were posted. Her vitriole was startling in contrast with the hesitant and hopeful woman sitting with us week by week. But soon enough, even that chasm closed over as words wove a net of mutual understanding between them.)

Unlike Stacy, Raven grew up middle-class, an honors student with opportunities for horseback riding and flute lessons. She lived a typical suburban New England life as a teen in the 1990's. At 20, her first pregnancy resulted in a stillborn daughter. That marked the beginning of

her unraveling, taking her to a ‘place beyond where you don't like yourself —where you don't even want to be in your own skin.’

At this point, her depression and addictions to drugs, relationships and work cycled together to bring her down. One of her earliest writings in prison described in excruciating detail the impossibility of denying that one last fix:

### Consumed

*We have worked so hard for it, though  
it seems like what we wanted was far away.  
Always grasping, reaching for it.  
It made me so stressed out at times.  
It distracted me from life as I kept desiring that which I wanted.  
At first, I was excited about it.  
Then it seemed to turn into a job itself in order to attain it.  
Yet, I still wanted it no matter what.  
Every day that went by, it made me want it more and more.  
What was going on around here?  
I became a former image of myself.  
Consumed by what I wanted,  
I forgot everything that I needed.  
What I wanted was the most important thing to me.*

*I had to obtain it or I would go insane!*  
*I said to myself, just let me have one more day.*  
*That's all I need was one last time to hold it in my hands.*  
*One last time to make me feel numb and happy all at once.*  
*One last time to cherish it and for it to satisfy me.*  
*After that last time, I still wanted to have it.*

*But, what we want is never that simple.*  
*What we need always seems to be waiting, right around the corner<sup>(9)</sup>*

Her life had become about her addiction. She was busted in a hotel room and sent to jail for eight months on a felony possession charge. She found herself unable to imagine life without her four children, or for that matter, life with what their feelings about her must now be. Depression dragged her further down. She wrote, from the depths of her despair, "My mind and soul shut closed like a home in winter. Wandering the same drab hallways day in, day out. I was numb for so many moonrises and sunsets that I don't remember what a sunrise looks like anymore." <sup>(10)</sup>

In the course of her eight months writing with us, Raven began to take responsibility for her addiction, and hence also her anger. Her writing, while still introspective, began to show glimmers of self-awareness and even humor. As her writing lightened up, she seemed to be following another internal light that began to carry her out of her self-imposed

darkness. Contrast this commentary on her addiction with 'Consumed:'

## Goodbye

*Please, let me loose to wander leeward.  
Let me roam this way and that.  
I, no longer, am a prisoner to you.  
I refuse to be chained to you any longer.  
We have been bound to one another  
for far too long.  
Why are you so afraid to let me go?  
There is always someone else to take my place.  
I have grown weary of the games  
we play every day.  
This used to be fun, now it's boring.  
Honestly, we are a pathetic duo.  
We are caught in the same cycle.  
I am no longer believing your lies!  
Who do you think you are any way?  
You are no longer master and I, slave.  
I will take a stand and break free.  
There is no way we can remain friends.  
Sorry, it's time for me to go.*

*We will not meet ever again.*

*You are no longer my destiny.*

*You are merely a glimpse of my past<sup>(1)</sup>*

Near the end of her time inside, Raven became increasingly confident in her writing ability – to the extent that, now outside, she is setting about the daunting task of writing her memoir. She understands that her story is one that can help others learn and heal as it started to for listeners at the launch of the book, **HEAR ME, SEE ME**, in which many of Raven’s writings appear. The following poignant writing was a response to an exercise in which we juxtaposed a memory of Younger Self into Current Self awareness, and was one of the final pieces of writing Raven did with us inside. I am eager to follow her to the next chapter of confidence, as we work together to shape her story into a publishable memoir:

### **Blind to the Future**

*She is so young, so naïve, so innocent.*

*Behind those honey-colored eyes is a young woman, lost.*

*She is searching for something that will take her years to find.*

*How I pity her. She does not see the treacherous path in front of her.*

*I pound my fist up against the thick window. I scream her name.*



*She can't hear or see me. I am beyond her reach.*

*She is swimming and gasping in a world created by her own false truth.*

*Appearing confident and carefree, but she is removed and cold on the inside.*

*She is more afraid than anyone I know.*

*I whisper to myself, "Please don't be afraid. You are stronger and more courageous than you know."*

*She doesn't acknowledge my pleas.*

*I weep for her because of the pain she will endure.*

*All the while smiling because I know that she will endure.*

*One day the storms inside will quiet, and she will find peace she never knew before.*

*I press my hand up against the smooth glass.*

*She looks my way and smiles, wistfully. Does she see me yet?*

*I long to hold her and comfort her.*

*But this is a journey she must take alone. So I back away.*

*She must do this in order to become the happy and confident woman I am today<sup>(12)</sup>*

The third and final woman whose work I want to share here is Tess. Like Raven a mother of four, Tess unlike Raven has a long and hard history of serious drug addiction. For her it is an absolute world of black and white. If she uses even a little, she goes into full-blown binge. When she first came to group, she was nearly incoherent in her writing; her speech rambled, her thoughts hung like disconnected lanterns in the air. But she quickly became devoted to the group. Over the years, I gained an understanding of her life

from the scattered and sometimes contradictory pieces she uncovered through images and words. It became apparent that drug dependency was her main challenge. What took longer to uncover was her history of choosing really destructive men as partners, and the lifelong distrust between her mother and herself that both initiated her into and prolonged her drug use, personified here:

### **Crawling on My Knees**

*You've taken every ounce of dignity. When you gave me your super powers, you gave me the good morning America power lines that reached out to broken homes across my area. Standing by, watching at your own mercy squeezing out the vital thoughts that it was wrong, and you made me believe it was right... when I was low down and tired you picked me up, and see I guess it's not that bad, it's like 10 cups of coffee you gave me... You watched it cause me pain and you didn't care, you continued to feed me, to the point I couldn't function, I couldn't live my life because the power took over and made a monster out of me... you had me at your mercy, crawling on my knees, you brought me over the threshold of hell and left me there to die... <sup>(13)</sup>*

Tess was released three times in the past five years. Each time she was released, she went on escape at some point. Each time she returned she seemed more chastened, and more determined to clean up her act. Following her last return, she completed high school, in part thanks to

work she did with us to fulfill her writing requirements. Proud as could be, we all attended her graduation ceremony. In the months preceding her release, we talked and wrote a lot about her intentions, which displayed an enormous forward stride in personal honesty. In group, she wrote this moving (unsent) letter to her father:

### **Things I'd Rather You Not Know**

*It's how it happened that's shameful. The thought of you finding out makes me want to run and hide. I feel selfish, too, knowing you are my father, the one who watched me grow; and how would you have known, it was hidden so well. My own pain is just too much to try to even begin to feel; but watching your whole world crumble makes this much more confusing.*

*I don't want you to remember this, but we have really no choice. The things I didn't want you to know came out. My only thoughts are: can you still love me the same; and are you still going to be here to support me? I'm scared to death to be alone a minute longer with all the hurt and shamefulness that's been going on inside. A void within me that has shattered my perception of who I am and what it is I should be.*

*I've learned over time how to push the pain and fear deeper down, just for the sake of my own well-being. On the outside, I'm looking like the woman who's reached her beauty; but inside is the killer. I'm all these mixed emotions, bottled up tightly, trying to figure out if I let out the true thing I feel within me, will you love me, accept me and fill me with your pride? Somewhere along the way, I got lost in others' plans; but today, with*

*your help, I can better begin to figure out how to feel like a woman of self worth and confidence* <sup>(14)</sup>

Once out in August 2013, she got a very good, steady, high-paying job; enrolled in two college courses; rented an apartment; paid off staggering debt; bought a car – an amount of challenge and responsibility that would stagger even the strongest. In that time, Marybeth and I met with her weekly to counsel, support and encourage her. She seemed to be living the words she had penned just prior to leaving: “It’s a great feeling knowing I can no longer let fear drive me through this life of mine, and with each goal I check off my list, I am reclaiming my own worth and learning I CAN do anything, as long as I give it time and give it my all.” <sup>(15)</sup>

In January 2014 she made parole. I was with her at that hearing, her oft-declared determination ringing in my ears: “I’m never going back to jail.” But it all fizzled shortly after making parole. She used, went out of control, and was soon picked up for escape. It turns out, during her final months out, she burned a LOT of bridges; racked up still more debt; and depended heavily both financially and emotionally on a man with his own murky past and dubious current motives – a familiar pattern among most of these women.

I learned from Tess how impossible it is for me to truly grasp the death grip a serious addiction has on someone. I also learned that, while it is essential to have clear and strong personal/emotional boundaries with these women – who have perfected lying, denial, duplicity and manipulation

to a degree defying description – I do not want to become jaded. I SO want to truly extend a hand and keep it extended. But it's not always clear how to do that and still function in their best interest – and my own. Today Tess is, sadly, back inside. She understands that she has let everyone down. She understands that she cannot go 'home,' a place that spells only toxic desperation and return to all the abuses she has escaped. I cannot predict what lies ahead for Tess. But what I can say is, hers is testimony to the resilience of the human spirit. As long as she can keep trying, and truly want to change, I am there to offer my words, my support and my encouragement. I also want to remind her of the moving poem she wrote a year back, excerpted here:

### **I Am Here**

*'God is an ocean of mercy....Collapse into God's arms  
and you'll weep like a child.'* – Rumi

*It is me, your daughter...*

*I am here, broken before you,  
ready to receive your glory...*

*I am at your mercy;*

*I am on bended knee  
asking for you to hold me,  
comfort me, show me  
how to control my fear of the world.  
Give me the strength, the power  
to rise from the bondage of my addiction.  
Clear my path of suffering  
and give me your love.  
I am right here,  
ready to receive it,  
live in it, breathe it,  
and give it back to the world...*

*I want to live my life as though  
I am wrapped tightly in your arms,  
not stranded out at sea  
with no means to a life,  
lost, forgotten, unforgiven, broken,  
and with no direction to save me.*

*When I am strong enough,  
when the time is right -  
give me rest, clear my mind,*

*cleanse my soul, give me peace.  
Let the flood of my emotions release,  
renewing my passage into this life.  
Rebuild my self-confidence.  
Give me new life,  
new encounters that enrich my life.  
Encourage the energy that surrounds me  
to be of peace and comfort.  
I trust you,  
you have never forsaken me.  
Growth is key in my addiction. <sup>(16)</sup>*

Tess keeps returning to her writing, not as a cheap way to speak to what someone else wants to hear, but as a deep soul-searching path to her own deepest truth: that she is a worthwhile person with many talents and gifts to offer the world. It's just that she needs to forge a new world from the one she knew growing up. She needs to step into the complete unknown and trust herself. This she will be able to do with a supportive team, and with writing. As she re-reads words she has written over the years, she sees with her own eyes and heart what has motivated and what has moved her. And they be mountains she has now to climb.

## Final Reflection

It is clear that writing has become an important tool in the lives of many of the women with whom we write inside prison. Not only has our group offered women a place to discover and explore their voice, many for the first time finding permission to speak the unspeakable. It is equally clear that the routine and structure of the group creates a trusted community where they share a new kind of comraderie. The weekly agreements seal their commitment; the weekly found poems meld their voices into one; and the other outlets we provide give them a sense that theirs are stories worth hearing. We publish a quarterly anthology of their writings, which is distributed to all women writing with us during that period of time, as well as to their mentors, DOC staff, our funders, and other program staff supportive of our work. Twice a year, the women give a reading to which they invite other inmates and staff. Twice weekly we post their writings, sprinkled with commentary, on our dedicated blog, [writing inside VT](#). And of course the book, which was solicited by Orbis Books, has given the women an enormous boost of self-confidence. How many women leaving prison can boast published status!

Even for those not in the published book, women uniformly report that our writing circles provide them a space in which to reflect, think, write through, share and express themselves in ways that promote growth and change. We have often heard that ‘putting it down on paper’ creates a form



of release for so much that otherwise remains pent up and potentially explosive.

In particular, we offer a rare opportunity for these women to engage in an active process toward self-understanding. Far beyond a diversionary activity, our circles become an anchor for many, a staple of their week to look forward to and learn from. Commitment to the circle and its values also manifest in the number of friends brought into the circle by ongoing participants. Finally, it has become the norm for one to three women to stay beyond group time to discuss personal issues, bounce ideas off us, and seek feedback for their insights. Every week we receive post-group comments similar to the following.<sup>(17)</sup> It seems telling indeed that similar comments are made by the weekly inside writers – and those on the outside listening, usually for the first time, to these unexpectedly wise and generous voices of women sharing their lives and their hearts, from inside – out.

*I really enjoyed today's circle. I was able to look inside instead of looking out. Thank you.*

*I thought today's way of writing was freeing because I could write knowing that it would not leave this room.*

*I like listening to other people. It always amazes me to hear other people's story. It helps*

*me empathize with them. I like the group always no matter what.*

*I enjoyed the opening poem, thank you for sharing it. One of my favorite things is read-back lines, and hearing other people's' views. It is an honor to be included in the circle and in sharing.*

*It was easy to make a poem from the lists of what I see and what I don't see; yet it was hard to read it. My heart felt heavy today and it was hard to not cry! It felt hard to hurt for others and not think of myself.*

*My first time and what we did I really enjoyed. It made me open my eyes to an insight I haven't noticed. Powerful.*

*Thank you! It's better than the time with the social worker consultant. It's helped me to let it go . .*

### **Works Cited**

*Hear Me, See Me: Incarcerated Women Write.* Eds. Marybeth Christie and Sarah W. Barlett. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013.

Morton, Nellie. *The Journey is Home.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1985

## Resources

[\*writing inside VT\*](#), our blog of writings and commentary from Vermont's incarcerated women

[\*\*HEAR ME, SEE ME: Incarcerated Women Write\*\*](#), a collection of the raw, unedited prose and poetry from 60 of Vermont's imprisoned women

[\*History Written as Beauty: Incarcerated Women Write\*](#), review of HEAR ME, SEE ME on the Wellesley College Women's Review of Books blog, with the story of another long-time writer.

[\*Women and Prison: Stories so Strong they Crumble Concrete\*](#), a website, installation and zine created entirely from the work and lives of America's incarcerated women

[\*Ten Truths that Matter when working with Justice Involved Women\*](#), National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, April 2012

[\*\*Center for Gender and Justice\*\*](#), a project of Stephanie S. Covington, Ph.D. and Barbara E. Bloom, Ph.D. experts on issues affecting women and girls in the criminal justice system. Through publications, presentations, and technical assistance, they have advised a wide range of criminal justice agencies in the United States, Canada and Europe.

**Sarah W. Barlett**, Experienced writing coach and facilitator, founded

[writing inside VT](#), a weekly program since 2010 for Vermont's incarcerated women to write for self-discovery, personal and social change. Between two chapbooks published by Finishing Line Press (*Slow Blooming Gratuities*, 2017; and [Into the Great Blue: Meditations of Summer](#), 2011) she co-edited [HEAR ME, SEE ME: Incarcerated Women Write](#) (Orbis Books, 2013). She has contributed chapters to the award-winning [Women on Poetry: Writing, Revising, Publishing and Teaching](#) (McFarland & Co., Inc., 2012), [Contemporary American Women: Our Defining Passages](#), (All Things That Matter Press, 2009) as well as *Ars Medica*; and poems to *the Aurorean*, *Adanna*, *LiteraryMama*, *Minerva Rising*, *MomEggReview*, *PoemMemoirStory*, among others. Sarah blogs at [sarahmbartlett.com](http://sarahmbartlett.com).

## **Watercolor Words and Release: Poems of Surrender**

*Wendy Thompson*

“When I paint and write poetry I forget all about everything else – having no job, no home, and an aching back – everything goes away. I used to do that with drugs. Now I have art.” John (named changed), a resident at a local homeless shelter, spoke of his appreciation for the Watercolor, Words & Release workshop held at his AA group. Nine residents of a Gresham, Oregon homeless shelter joined watercolor artist Elise Astleford and poet Wendy Thompson for three Wednesdays in June to explore – through poetry and painting – the 3<sup>rd</sup> Step in Alcoholics’ Anonymous: “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand Him.”

Surrendering, letting go of control in our lives, is difficult no matter where we are in our journey. The creative process is ideal for practice in letting go. Try gathering a page of random, found words and phrases; then organize them into a set poetry form like acrostic, haiku, or lune. You’ll no doubt discover that by letting go of linear thought patterns – control of your words – that the poem before you transcends rational thought and opens doors to new ways of thinking and being. Dip a brush in watercolor, dab it on a wet page, and watch miracles of beauty immerge without pre-design. Participation in the creative process has the power to transform and

heal.

In addition to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Step message of letting go, members of AA frequently recite the Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change  
the courage to change the things I can  
and the wisdom to know the difference.

~Reinhold Niebuhr

The art of surrender includes letting go of patterns and ways of being that continually don't work for us. We learn to trust in the unknown and find the courage to make changes in our lives. As Maya Angelou once said, "Stepping onto a brand-new path is difficult, but not more difficult than remaining in a situation which is not nurturing." Many members of AA are particularly challenged with changing unhealthy patterns, behaviors, and habits in their lives. They must take a tremendous leap of faith that a personal paradigm shift out of substance abuse is ultimately going to make their lives more satisfying, even when the immediate future is dim and painful without their drug of choice. "For original ideas to come about, you have to let them percolate under the level of consciousness in a place where we have no way to make them obey our own desires or our own direction," writes Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow*, "Their random combinations are driven by forces we don't know about."

In the Watercolor, Words & Release workshop, participants explore

both the concept of letting go and finding the courage to make changes through the following activities:

- Reading and responding to poems about letting go and change;
- Exploring examples of surrender in their lives and creating word lists describing the color, line, shape, texture, sound, smells, and tastes of those experiences;
- Exploring a variety of painting techniques to create images for artist's cards and serenity books;
- Expanding their word lists in relationship to the watercolors they paint;
- Utilizing their word lists to write short surrender poems and 3<sup>rd</sup> Step affirmations for the back of the artist cards;
- Accordion folding watercolor images into a book and writing poems in the book, and;
- Sharing individual final books and reflections on the experience to the whole group.

The first session opened with a group reading of *Autumn: The Sacrament of Letting Go* by Macrina Widerkehr. Participants were asked to underline the words or phrases in the poem that resonated with them. Then they reflected on images of letting go or surrender (leaves falling off branches, white flag of surrender, waving goodbye, emptying a vessel, firecrackers, body surfing in the ocean...). They were shown photographs

of a rushing river and firecrackers exploding and were asked to write down words in response to: What is the color, shape, line, texture, sound, smell, taste of letting go? Finally, they created similes using those words (Letting go is like riding the black spiral of a whirlpool).

The students were then given instruction in a variety of watercolor techniques such as wet on wet drip/tip or swimming, adding salt to the pigment, dabbing, spraying, or blowing the colors around with a straw. With five 2.5 x 3.5 inch watercolor artist's cards, they played and improvised with these techniques. They were encouraged to let go of making any recognizable images and let the paint take the lead on the card. While the cards dried, participants returned to their word list to create a short "Let Go" acrostic mantra to write on the back of one of their cards. They were also given printed versions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> step and Serenity Prayer to glue on the back of their artist's cards.

Leaf drifts through

Every worry

To blue sky of

Grace and all will be

Okay

Norman Maclean, in his book *A River Runs through It*, wrote about the connection between grace and art, "My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things – trout as well as eternal salvation – come by grace and grace comes by art and art



does not come easily.”

The second session opened with an excerpt from Hitch Haiku by Gary Snyder

After weeks of watching the roof leak

I fixed it tonight

by moving a single board

Participants journaled responses to the questions below:

1. In what ways can you relate to a leaking roof?
2. Why do you think the narrator watched the roof leak for weeks?
3. What are the leaky roofs in your life?
4. What small steps can you take to “fix” your leaks? (*The Healing Fountain*)

They used their free writes to create their own haikus or lunes. A lune is a variation of the haiku where instead of syllable counts the poet counts words per line with three words on the first line, five on the second, and three on the third. After 30 minutes of writing, the watercolor instructor reviewed the painting techniques. Everyone was given a strip of watercolor paper (29.5 x 5.5 inches) to paint a long “landscape” of letting go, keeping in mind their word lists, poems, and experiences of surrender. They were reminded not to over think or try too hard and were only giving 15 minutes to paint.

While the watercolor strips were drying, participants responded to each other’s paintings with the prompts below. A blank sheet of paper was

placed by each painting so participants could rotate through all the paintings and write responses to:

- If you were to title this painting, what would you title it?
- When looking at this painting, what do you hear, smell, taste?
- I feel \_\_\_\_as a\_\_\_\_\_when I look at this painting.
- What verbs, nouns, and adjectives can you attribute to this painting

The final session opened with Portia Nelson's poem *Autobiography in Five Short Chapters*. Participants were asked to respond to this poem in relationship to Gary Snyder's poem and expand on their reflections about surrender and change in their AA journey.

They were then instructed on how to fold their watercolor strips into an accordion and glue them on to 4x6 inch book board covers. When the books were constructed, they selected a poem or free write from the previous days to write into their books. Finally, they decorated the covers and added any drawings or collage photos they wished to add into the book.

All participants gathered with their finished books into a circle. They reviewed the Ground Rules for Creative Workshops below and then shared out whatever part of their book they were comfortable sharing. Each participant was asked to say what they were most proud of and other group members made one comment about what they liked best about each of the other books. Katie (name changed) commented, "I wasn't sure I wanted to do this workshop because I'm really terrible at art, but I'm so

proud of my book, what I created. This workshop wasn't so bad and I realized I can do art."

### **Ground Rules for Creative Workshops**

1. **CONFIDENTIALITY:** What is shared in the group by others stays in the group. Refer to an "I-voice" in writing as "narrator" or "character" and don't assume that the writing reflects the author's personal experience. In other words, treat all writing as fiction.
2. **RIGHT TO PASS:** Each session offers a creative prompt and you are free to either follow the prompt or move out in other directions. There are opportunities to share your creation and you have the right pass on sharing.
3. **COMMENTS:** Much of the work you create is in process and not ready for a full critique. Responses to each other's work will be only in the form of what is strong/memorable to the listeners/observers. Refrain from sharing how the writing of another relates to your own experiences.
4. **ACTIVE LISTENING:** Focus on the person sharing his/her work without interruption. When it is your turn to share, read the work without introduction, explanation, or apology. Listen silently to people's responses without explaining, justifying, or apologizing. Note any questions and respond only after all observers/listeners have had a chance to respond.

Two weeks after the final workshop the program manager at the homeless shelter wrote to poet/facilitator, Wendy Thompson saying that residents couldn't stop talking about how great the workshop was and they wanted to schedule a second round for more residents. This is the power of all art forms to heal and transform. Participants in the Watercolor, Words & Release workshop left with old habits released, and new ones created; strategies for reframing of situations that previously left them stuck, and; written and painted intentions, affirmations, and reminders that resonated with a unique, internal wisdom for each of them. As Robert Henri said in *The Art Spirit*, "A work of art is the trace of a magnificent struggle." Nine individuals with tremendous life struggles, aggravated by addiction, encountered a few moments of insight, hope, and relief thanks to the healing and transformative power of visual and language arts.

### Works Cited

- The Healing Fountain: Poetry Therapy for Life's Journey*. Eds. Chavis, Geri Giebel and Lila Lizabeth Weisberger. Minneapolis: North Star Press, 2003.
- Henri, Robert. *The Art Spirit*. Denver: Westview Press, 1984.
- Maclean, Norman. *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Nelson, Portia. *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk: the Romance of Self-Discovery*. OR:

Beyond Words Publishing, 1993.

Widerkehr, Macrina. *Seasons of Your Heart: Prayers & Reflections*. CA:

HarperCollins, 1991.

**Wendy Thompson, MFA**, is a poet, educator, kayaker, singer, and ARTivist~employing the arts for social justice, transformation, and healing. She trained in TLA at Goddard College, through the TLAN, and at the Center for Journal Therapy. An arts educator for three decades in three states, she currently teaches in Vancouver, WA. Her fervor for social justice led her to work specifically with LGBT youth and publish an anthology of student poetry, *From Here, There & Everywhere: Poems of Origin & Hope*, in response to immigration ICE raids in Portland, OR. She performs her award-winning poetry in venues around the northwest and has been published in a variety of anthologies as well as *Science & Children*, and *Teaching Tolerance* magazines.

**CREATIVE PRODUCTS: TLA PROCESS EXPOSED**

**Triptych: Etch-a-Sketch Icon,  
Crayon Litanies of Faith**

*Ramona Anne McCallum*

**Etch-a-sketch Iconography**

You wouldn't think four circles could be  
so confusing: our faces  
in the middle of the sandy screen--  
Dad, my little sister, Mom, and me.

In my mind I saw us holding hands  
but the drawing that took shape in my lap  
on the basement pew of our home church  
looked more like tangled saplings,

each of us hunched beneath a strange, lop-sided sun.  
Or a few crumpled crosses with Dad's right arm stretched  
over the edge where the pinpoint black dot sat  
in the beginning, waiting for my hands to twist

the knobs into a glorious, acceptable design. *We are called to be icons of Christ*, my dad preached. He invited the neighbors and turned them into his congregation. My job was to stay quiet until it was time to pray. How many Sundays

did I do everything he'd say? How many years did I shake that Etch-a-Sketch clear? My make-believe tabula rasa as I tried to look like God and create a good and regular family.

### **Catholic Bastard**

With his own dad dead, three months before my dad was born, Phil Jr. found a father in God, and he got to leave the hens cooped up at home, those clucking women who pecked his life apart--

An Irish mother. A teenaged trinity of sisters. His grandma. That old-lady aunt.

And he went behind the altar with the priests at St. Cecelia's. And he thought about the kind of life he'd one day, wholly, have.

Where else was there to go in Hastings,  
Nebraska, for the boy no one taught to throw  
a ball or fix a car? Just as far as heaven. Then half  
a life-time later, Fr. Philip dragged  
his wife and daughters with him, made us  
recite the 5th commandment and kneel.  
Communion-time: the perfect way

to bake us all into his family cake and eat  
Christ too. But I knew Priests weren't supposed  
to be married. Wasn't that just Dad playing  
dress-up in our living room?

Time to confess this daughter's heart:  
*Ok, Papa. I tried. I prayed to believe.*

I ate flesh you put in my mouth  
and I drank blood from your chalice. I was  
small though, and wanted to play. And now  
somehow the memory tastes like a glass  
of kool-aid with stale crackers that I gag on,  
trying to keep it all down.



## Vow of Repentance

Okay, I promise I'll do better. I will not  
say fuck anymore. I give up; I won't  
say fuck. I will

not say fuck say fuck say fuck  
unless I'm fucking glad.

Fuck yeah, Dad! I remember  
my DIY Catechism in first grade,  
one night at supper when I asked

what *f u c k* spelled.

I saw it on the bathroom wall at school and wanted  
to know. But when I asked, you swallowed hard  
and spilled the canned green beans you passed

around the table. You sat up taller, shook  
your finger. Then your preacher's voice  
came out. I heard you shout:

*That word is blasphemy against  
the sacrament of marriage.*

So I shut up. But that night I opened  
a new good book, took it to bed instead  
of the Bible. And I discovered  
*fuck* all by myself.

In the beginning was your word,  
Dad, but your word was not my God.  
So many fucking words were God  
  
and it was wonderful beholding  
all my dear Lord told me inside  
His big, thick dictionary.

When I write my pain onto the page, the rough drafts catch my tears and the words of my revisions seem to arrange themselves in a way that helps me to better understand both the world around me and myself -- my most authentic self. This segmented poem reflects the grief I repressed, as a child whose papa was a man of God and wanted parishioners just as much as he wanted his very own family. "Triptych" is set in my childhood,

when I was seven years old and it seemed like my dad disappeared -- each Sunday and also nightly, at the dinner table, as he prepped for next week's sermon. This poem is able to convey what I was not able to communicate as a child--that I felt abandoned by the papa who once played devotedly with me, spent time with me and taught me how to pray and appreciate God's world. As an adult I now see how my repressed feelings of abandonment have placed me, throughout my life, in a perpetual state of interpersonal and spiritual crisis. Through the process of writing "Triptych," I was able to recognize and transform unconsciously-held psychological and spiritual wounds. This poem became an act of healing and its finished form brings me a sense of a peace and a connection to what I identify as God's poetic grace.

I began writing "Triptych" last year, while working on my MFA as a Durwood fellow in poetry at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Taking a class on Milton's *Paradise Lost* triggered a surge of confusing memories related to my heavy-duty Christian upbringing. I knew I must transform those memories into written verse because the blank page is the first place I go during moments of personal chaos and emotional turmoil. With the work-at-hand, my poetic process of revision included combining three separate poems into a poetic trinity. Combining these poems was an act of literary empowerment. Separated, they only revealed limited sides of the story. Together, they encompass my own Midwest American Christian epic, and one that I hope other people who have experienced some form of

religious bewilderment will relate to.

When I am able to make poetic sense out of past confusion and real-life pain, I am empowered to let the past go and start living in the here and now while simultaneously looking forward to a future full of love and creativity. I have a say in its design. The first two sections of "Triptych" allowed me to feel compassion, both for the girl I was and also for my father. While the poem does not overtly let the reader know this, I no longer hold a grudge against my dad. I no longer feel confused. I have no doubt he did his best and I am grateful that he followed God's calling. It sets a good example for all of us creators, actually. Creating peace out of the pain on the page allows me to free up space within my heart for the positive memories to expand. After writing this, I realize I am grateful for my unusual childhood. Parts of it were really weird and funny. I write about those moments too. Writing the third segment of "Triptych" allowed me to bring a lighter note to this work as a finale. Its an ars poetic offering to you, my reader and friend in the TLA community. Let our words flip the birdie now and then. I set out to drop the F-bomb with aplomb, using the line-breaks of the first stanza to convey a syntactical mixed-message. Is the voice here a compliant or rebellious child? The conclusion of this work reveals how the rebellious child that I was chose to follow her own calling, to assert herself with the power of words and grow up to become the poet I am today, honored to meet you.

# Enduring Witness—A Transformative Play

*Hilton Koppe*

*Contributions from Amanda Shoebridge, Francesca O'Neill, Andrew Gibson, Lynne Charleston, Romaine Moore, Bruce McClure, Terrill Gibson, Zenlan Moor, Michael Potter, Gillian Eastgate, Vivianne Walkington, Mark Henshke, Frank Meumann, Peter Silberberg, Claire Noonan, Michael Douglas*

## Synopsis

Enduring Witness traces the relationship between Geoff, a family General Practitioner, and one of his patients Lisa. Geoff initially treats Lisa as a school girl, through young adulthood to marriage and parenthood. Lisa develops breast cancer, and we follow the ups and downs of her treatment, initial remission, relapse and finally her death.

The story focuses on the effect this has on Geoff's inner world, which contrasts with his professional exterior. Although Geoff's journey is portrayed as mostly being a lonely one, he does gain support and understanding from Lisa towards the end.

## Characters

Geoff: A middle aged rural family practitioner

Lisa: Starts action as a 17 year old school girl, and grows to late 30s mother of 2 children

## Act 1

*Desk center stage at angle, with 2 chairs. Computer and other tools of trade of family doctor on desk. Geoff is seated at the desk, typing on computer. He stands, moves to stage left*  
Geoff: *Lisa McCormack? Lisa enters from stage left*

Geoff: Hi Lisa, come on in.

Lisa: Hi Dr Geoff.

Geoff: You here on your own today, Lisa? *Lisa and Geoff take their seats.* Lisa: Yeh, mum had to drop the boys off at footy training. She'll be back to pick me up in about 20 minutes.

Geoff: Okay, so how can I help you today?

Lisa: I've had this really sore throat and have been really tired for the last few days. There is a bit of glandular fever going around at school, and I've got my final exams next month. Mum really wants me checked out so we know what's going on.

Geoff: Anything else apart from the sore throat and tiredness? Any cough or a rash?

Lisa: No, not really, mostly just the sore throat and tired. Oh yeah, and mum said that I had a fever last night.

Geoff: No worries, Lisa, hop up on the couch and I'll check things out for

you.

*Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. Lisa turns away from Geoff.*

Geoff: sore throat and tired few days. Fever last night. No cough. On examination, afebrile, chest clear, ears normal, throat – enlarged red tonsils with moderate exudate. Tender cervical nodes. Diagnosis, tonsillitis. Query early glandular fever. Management, start penicillin, ibuprofen for pain or fever, get bloods if not improving by end of the week.

Lisa: *(Writing in her journal)*

I can't believe I'd get sick right now, when there's so much going on. I've got exams coming up, my English assignments due and Mrs Bryant said there'd be no extensions for anyone this time. We can thank Brian for that after he tried to get out of the last one with a phoney medical certificate. *(You'd have thought he'd been bright enough to find out what amputation was first!)*

And all my friends are going to Dreamworld too. I overheard Matt say on the bus that he's going too. I bet he ends up sitting next to Alicia—all the boys like Alicia....

Anyway, I don't care. There are more important things than boys and Dreamworld. If I don't pass the exams I may not get into college. I mean it's not like I totally know what I want to do with my life. I haven't even decided on a course yet! Jenny reckons she had a calling to be a vet... I don't think I've had a calling – if I did it can't have been too loud! I just know that I want to do something big. I feel like there's something I'm

meant to do... It's just finding out what that is!

Anyway, I have my whole life to work that out – there's heaps of time. I just have to pass these exams! Just wish I wasn't so tired all the time.... (Lisa stands and goes behind her chair).

By Amanda Shomaker

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair.*

Lisa: Exams soon, holy shit!

A chance for university,

Make me well Dr Geoff

My body's non-complicity....

Sore throat, lethargy

Fever and swollen glands

No fear! With Dr Geoff

I know I'm in safe hands

By Francesca O'Neill

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair*

Geoff: Query glandular fever?

Couldn't be easier

So kissing does cause

Adolescents to pause



Generations I span  
With their lives in my hands  
Family 'doc' really does have rewards

By Andrew Gibson

*Lights fade down*

## **Act 2**

*Lights up. Geoff and Lisa return to their seats and face each other*

Lisa: Now that I'm in a regular relationship with Matt, I thought I might go on the pill. I definitely don't want to get pregnant while I am still at college

Geoff: Sure Lisa. Tell me what you already know about the pill, then we'll work out what will be best for you

*Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. Lisa turns away from Geoff*

Geoff: Requesting script for pill. Good understanding of how it works and possible side effects. No contraindications. Currently sexually active with long term boyfriend. Using condoms. No other risks for STIs. PAP done last year. BP 100 over 70. Management – given sample packs of Yasmin for 4 months. Advised of correct pill use. Review in 2 months for script if all okay.

Lisa: (*Writing in her journal*)

He's just so gorgeous! You know what Matt said to me this morning? He called me his perfect angel. And he jokes all the time about us growing old and getting senile together, and the brood of 15 children we'll have! Very sweet! But not just yet! I don't know what I'd do if I fell pregnant right now. It feels like my life is just beginning, and I'm loving college. So no dirty nappies for me just yet! Time to see the doc about the pill.

By Amanda Shoebridge

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair*

Lisa: Back again with Dr Geoff

Here to talk about sex!

Red faced, uncomfortable

What pray-tell will happen next?

Reassurance, kindness

No need for concern

Coils!? Rods!? Pills!? Rings!?

Hmmmm, how to discern?

The pill sounds best

Let's try it out Problems?

Give Dr Geoff a shout!

By Francesca O'Neill

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair.*

Geoff: From a child to a woman,  
She has bloomed to her prime  
When I was her age,  
She might have been mine  
It is great to observe  
As her doc I serve.

By Andrew Gibson

*Lights fade down*

### **Act 3**

*Lights up. Geoff and Lisa return to their seats and face each other.*

Geoff: (handing Lisa a prescription) Here's your script Lisa. So, was there anything else for today?

Lisa: Actually Geoff, Matt and I are getting married at the end of next month.

Geoff: That's fantastic. Congratulations

Lisa: (Reaching into her bag for an invitation) We were really hoping that you and your wife would be able to come to the wedding. It's just that I feel that I have known you all of my life. You're like part of our family/

Geoff: Thanks Lisa, that's lovely. I'll check things out at home and let you know if we can make it.

*Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. Lisa turns away from Geoff.*

Geoff: Routine well woman's check. Happy with current pill. Been on it for 5 years. No side effects. Periods regular. Pap smear done – normal. Breast check done – normal. Continue pill. Recall for pap smear in 2 years.

Lisa: (*Writing in her journal*) AM – To do today:

- [ Finalise dress
- [ Organise flowers
- [ Finalise invitation
- [ Dr appointment check – up

I'd really like Geoff to be at my wedding – mum agrees, he's known me forever and he's really part of the family.

Wonder if I should ask him? Why not, would love him to share our happiness. After all, he only really sees us when we need him for medical stuff, so this would be a welcomed change and let him know how we feel about him.

PM – Dr Geoff seemed to be surprised at the invitation and chuffed at the same time – hope he comes. Looks like I'm fit and healthy – as usual. Dr Geoff checked everything out, as usual being very particular – I have great faith and trust in him.

By Lynne Charleston

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair.*

Lisa: The doc

Someone to give me a sticker to dry tears after a needle

Someone to stick my tongue out for without getting into trouble

Someone I could let look at embarrassing private areas and know he would be gentle and kind

Someone I could tell private things and know he wouldn't tell anyone else

Someone I could rely on for advice on just about anything

Someone I could always trust

Someone who has always been there

Someone who would always listen

A friend

A confidante

A mentor

A part of the family

My doc

By Romaine Moore

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair*

Geoff: **This Young Girl**

Delicate beauty

Fragile strength

Joyous perfection

Embodiment of love

**This Young Girl**

Impossibly sees me as part of her

Wants to share her growth

Her emotion

Her delight

With me.....

With me

**This Old Man**

A shadow at her side

Blessed to watch

Age, witnessing the wonder of youth

Sharing traces of her life

By Bruce McClure

*Lights fade down*

**Act 4**

*Lights up. Geoff goes off stage right. Lisa returns to her seat, looking anxiously as Geoff returns carrying a pregnancy test strip. He puts it between them on the desk as he sits down.*

Geoff: Congratulations Lisa—you are pregnant!

Lisa: Oh, thanks Geoff, that's fantastic. I can't wait to tell Mat and mum. They will be over the moon.

*Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. Lisa turns away from Geoff.*

Geoff: Last period 6 weeks ago. Preg test positive. Antenatal screening discussed. Routine tests ordered. Review 1 month.

Lisa: *(Writing in her journal)*

AM Gee... I feel sick today.... Today's the day – off to see the doctor – finding out for sure. Mum and Matt are so excited – please, please, please.

PM YAY!!! I'm soooooo happy – I'm going to be a mum. Wonder what that means? I'm a bit scared though – I have seen more of the inside of a toilet bowl than I would like to but Dr Geoff and mum agree that it will pass – hope so...

I'm excited and feel very different. There's a little person growing inside of me.

Matt was so sweet, he had a tear in his eye. WE ARE GOING TO HAVE A BABY!!!! There will be "3" of us!!!

By Lynne Charelston

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair .*

Lisa: Positive

And the news comes

So eagerly anticipated, joyfully welcomed yet the twinge of anxiety pulls,

wrapping a tendril lightly around me.

Images of my life before crowd and jostle, then start to jumble and fade  
Words threaten to envelope me – motherhood, responsibility, entrapment I  
feel childhood gently slipping off me like a shawl that has become too  
heavy.

Replaced by a slow feeling of warmth I take a deep breath, look ahead of  
me, and smile.

By Romaine Moore

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair.*

Geoff: Child whom I tended Fruitful youth now maturing Blossom ripe  
beauty

By Bruce McClure

*Lights fade down*

## Act 5

*Lights up. Geoff and Lisa return to their seats and face each other.*

Lisa: Oh, and one more thing, Geoff. I've brought the kid's immunisation  
records in with me. I didn't have them with me when they had their shots  
last week. I was wondering if you'd be able to fill them in for me.

Geoff: Yeah, sure, no worries Lisa. Let's have a look here (Looking at  
computer screen as he takes the immunisation records from Lisa). How are  
the kids going?



Lisa: Great, thanks Geoff. Callum is in grade 1 this year. He's so happy not to be the youngest in the school any more. And Ruby is really enjoying pre-school. They're at such a great age now. I'm kind of looking forward to getting back to work next month, but I will miss spending so much time with them. *Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. Lisa turns away from Geoff.*

Geoff: Pre-employment medical. No significant past history. Pulse 76 regular BP 110 over 75. Heart sound dual, no murmurs. Chest clear. Abdo –normal. Neuro exam normal. Hearing normal. Vision 6 over 6 both eyes. Musculoskeletal exam normal. Urine analysis normal. Fit to return to work.

Lisa: (*Writing in her journal*)

- [ Gosh Dr Geoff is a great guy. He certainly cares about me and our family.
- [ I certainly am glad he's 'part of our family'
- [ He's always genuinely interested in me. Other doctors haven't always made me feel so comfortable as this.
- [ I can't believe the kids are growing up so fast!
- [ I love seeing them develop into little people.
- [ Immunisation is just another milestone for them and me too, really
- [ Returning to work will be wonderful for me to rediscover the 'old me' as I remember me, the working gal.
- [ BUT what a twist in my guts and heart leaving them after such an intense and special 'mummy' time.

[ Ah, well I have to grow-up as much as they do and learn to let them go to let them discover and create their own worlds.

By Terrill Gibson

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair.*

Lisa: The First Five Years

Nausea, nappies, noisy cry

Nourishment, nurture, milk supply

Nipple on nose

Five little toes

First big bite

Dear little mite

Eat it up

Hold your cup

Grow big and strong

It won't be long

Love, ecstasy

Exhaustion, drudgery

Just when I feel there's no more to give

They're at school I miss them

It's time for me to live

By Zewlan Moor

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair*

Geoff: She is water  
A young brook to be gazed upon  
Her stream of life  
Sun sparkles from her cascades

She is water  
Ripples of beauty  
Joy circling out from her soul  
Nourish, enrich those that swim in her lane  
Lap against my toes as I watch from the shore

She is water  
She flows deep and strong  
Now aqua profunda  
Rivulets and tributaries she has formed emanate from her, make her  
complete

She is water  
In which I too swim  
Honoured to share these depths with her  
Feel her vibrancy through the brine  
Watch her, protect her from currents unseen

By Bruce McClure

*Lights fade down.*

## Act 6

*Lights up. Geoff and Lisa return to their seats and face each other. Lisa is adjusting her top as she is sitting down, as if getting dressed after being examined.*

Geoff: I'm quite concerned about that breast lump.

Lisa: I think that you need to have further tests to sort out what it is. I'd like you to have a mammogram and an ultrasound as soon as possible. I'll ask the radiologist to do a biopsy at the time of the ultrasound. That way we can get the results as quickly as possible. Is that okay with you?

*Lisa: (Numb silence) Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. Lisa turns away from Geoff.*

Geoff: Firm non mobile 1.5 by 1.5cm lump upper outer quadrant right breast found at routine examination. Non tender. No other lumps. No axillary adenopathy. For mammogram, ultrasound and biopsy. Follow up appointment booked with me in 3 days

Lisa: (Writing in her journal) I think, No. I do KNOW that Dr Geoff is just simply being overly cautious about this lump. He's always been so conscientious and diligent about our health and well-being. I know it's nothing to worry about. Just like before.

BUT I'm so scared!! What if it is something?? I guess it will just be a simple procedure to remove a small lump. We can then get it sorted and get

back on track with our lives.

But But I'm so freaked out!!! What if it's the WORST. I mean look at Kylie Minogue and Rove McManus girlfriend. Shit!! They were my age! NO I'm sure it will be ok and I'll sort it out. Maybe drugs, maybe lose my hair, but not my life.

But what if it's the 'other' woman. Can't remember her name, but I certainly remember the stories and the ghastly, ghostly photos in those bloody magazines. She died. She didn't have kids. How the hell will I cope?

BUT I mustn't worry, Surely I'll be fine. I usually am, it's always nothing.

By Terrill Gibson

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair.*

Lisa: A lump, shocked silence They gave life, now they taketh? Can breasts be traitors?

By Zewlan Moor

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair.*

Geoff: You're struck by this

A bolt from the blue

A lesson you had to have

We all have to have

One day, struck

By Michael Potter

*Lights fade down.*

## Act 7

*Lights up. Geoff sits down first while Lisa remains standing behind her chair.*

Geoff: (Reading a pathology report) Shit, how am I ever going to tell her this? *Lisa sits down. Lisa and Geoff face each other.*

Geoff: The results are not great, I'm afraid, Lisa. The biopsy shows what we both feared most. You do have breast cancer. *Pause, shared silence*

Lisa: But I can't have cancer. Sorry. I can't. I've got 2 kids who need me. I can't have cancer. Not me. No. *(Pause, shared silence) Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. Lisa turns away from Geoff.*

Geoff: Mammogram and ultrasound consistent with cancer. Confirmed on biopsy. Appointment made with breast surgeon for Monday.

Lisa: *(Writing in her journal)* Omigod! I have breast cancer.

This can't be happening to me. This IS happening to me.

This tiny little marble in my body is a seed pod about to burst its evil contents all over my body.

Perhaps some seeds have already leaked out.

Dr Geoff looked so sad. He feels sorry for me. I don't like that he thinks I don't know what's coming.

Oh yes I do, Dr Geoff I've seen young woman with cancer. They all die. And before they die their bodies are cut and scarred, burned with radiation and filled with poison.

Omigod! My children. They're so little. They need a mother, they need me. I can't just give up and die.

So Dr Geoff, I will do it, for them. I will be cut and burned and poisoned. All for the hope of a little more time.....

By Gillian Eastgate

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair.*

Lisa: Cancer

Like a crab

Claws its way through breast and bone and brain

Makes a young lady old

Wind tugging headscarf

Blowing away

The thin body

Away from love

Family

Children

Wot me

It can't be me

It IS me

By Gillian Eastgate

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair.*

Geoff: I can see your new cold skin

The change of knowing that deep within your purity

Corruption lies

And grows

A part of you would still deny

That the whole does rely on wholeness itself

Order, love

No eclipse, whole moon above

But the temple's cracked

And truth begins

Decay and death and hate and sin

Are real, no amount of rage

Can restore

Lives. Hard. Fought. Wage

By Michael Potter

*Lights fade down.*

## Act 8



*Lights up. Geoff and Lisa return to their seats and face each other. Lisa is wearing head scarf.*

Lisa: The radiotherapy went okay Geoff, but this chemo is nearly killing me. I've just got no energy, I can't eat and the worst thing is I can't sleep, even though I'm so tired. Just lucky mum's staying with us to help me with the kids. I couldn't do it without her.

Geoff: It's terrible the way the treatment can make you feel so sick. But you're over half way through it now, so hang in there..... But I'm sure that's exactly what you have been doing. Hanging in there. For everyone else. It's really difficult for people in your situation to get the care that you need, when you have to care for others around you. I want you to know that you don't have to do that for me. You don't have to pretend when you come in here that everything's okay. I want this room to be a....a kind of sanctuary for you. A place where you can let your guard down and just be you. If you ever need to (*Pause*).....So, is there anything in particular you need from me today?

Lisa: Yeah, can you give me my life back?

*Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. Lisa turns away from Geoff.*

Geoff: Bad side effects from chemo. Anorexia. Tired. Low mood. Good support from mother. Review 1 month.

Lisa: (*Writing in her journal*) The nights are the worst. It is in the inky

blackness of the early hours that I am confronted by the overwhelming loneliness of this the ‘solo journey of life’. It’s strange – I have always thought that my life was shared. Shared, not only amongst the other billions of people on the planet but intimately by my family and friends intrinsically linked in this journey of life. In the depths of night I realise it is my journey alone. I am not sure I can survive the chemo.... But I must.... I am desperate to grab any moment I can with my children.

And so my mind continues to churn – with its unending stories and unanswered questions of what if..... if only.... Why me? I just want my LIFE BACK!!! NOT this nightmare I am forced to live.

By Vivianne Walkington

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair*

Lisa: A cry of despair

It is too hard. A nightmare

“why me?” hear myself say

By Mark Henshke

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair.*

Geoff: In potions we trust

Lisa we must

And faith it seems

You have for now.

I haven't room for doubt  
To play on my face  
You must see only my calm.  
And the calm face  
We both present  
Is brave in hope  
Yet I lament  
Time again  
The face I know  
Is all.  
Is all there is.  
A face  
A show

By Michael Potter

*Lights fade down. Lights up. Geoff and Lisa return to their seats and face each other.*

Geoff: You're looking well, Lisa. How are things going?

Lisa: Yeah, fine thanks, Geoff. I'm just glad to have all the treatments behind me. We're all just trying to get on with life normally again. I'm due to have my mammogram and ultrasound again next month, and I just need a referral for that. Can I come back to get the results from you. I much prefer doing it here rather than with the surgeon. Is that alright with you? Fingers crossed, it will all still be okay.

Geoff: Of course, Lisa, that's fine. I'll do the referral for you now. Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. *Lisa turns away from Geoff.*

Geoff: Due for annual mammogram and ultrasound. Otherwise well. Review for results.

Lisa: (*Writing in her journal*) The joy of feeling well again!!!  
Truly treasures!

The children are just so beautiful and I love them just so much. I am valuing each day with them so much more since my cancer diagnosis. I really don't want to miss sharing any of their lives. Surely my cancer is gone. Haven't I been through enough already???

I am not going to allow myself to think that I may still have cancer. I have made up my mind to stay positive.

By Vivianne Walkington

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair.*

Lisa: 'The good fight'

You have walked with me through the DARKNESS

You do not know,

You cannot know.

But there is light now

My despair turns to hope

My anxiety to relief, thank god!

By Mark Henshke

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair.*

Geoff: I see her smile, squeaky joy I feel my voice, held deep I grasp her relief, warm rays I feel my mind, stretching I want to believe

By Frank Meumann

*Lights fade down.*

## Act 10

*Lights up. Geoff and Lisa return to their seats and face each other.*

Lisa: I'm sure the pain in my back is nothing. It's probably just something simple from picking up the kids – they are so heavy now, I really shouldn't be lifting them anymore, but we do love our big hugs. But you know how it is, there is always this thought lingering at the back of your mind – it couldn't be something else, could it?

Geoff: Well, let's have a look Lisa, and we'll find out. Sometimes the worrying about it is the worst thing. Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. *Lisa turns away from Geoff.*

Geoff: Increasing low back pain over last few weeks. Worse with movement and lifting. Wakes her at night. On examination. Full range of motion lumbar spine. Tender over L 5 and left sacro ileac region. Management—Xray, bone scan and bloods. Review 1 week.

Lisa: (*Writing in her journal*) Geoff didn't seem worried so surely that's a good sign. I have been busy lately and doing more than normal. Maybe I have just overdone it? I really need to get back to the gym and get fitter. Maybe I should make an appointment with the chiropractor? OR maybe it's muscular? Haven't I been through enough already??

By Vivianne Walkington

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair.*

Lisa: "That look"

It is, isn't it

I can see it in your eyes

May your eyes be wrong

By Mark Henshke

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair.*

Geoff: I see her body, twisted

I feel my slippery fear

I hear her pain, fractured frame

I feel my voice, glued words

Hold my fear

Hold my fear

By Frank Meumann

*Lights fade down.*

## Act 11

*Lights up. Geoff sits down first while Lisa remains standing behind her chair.*

Geoff: (Holding up an xray film) Shit, here we go again. *Geoff picks up phone and dials number.*

Geoff: Hi, it's Geoff Pickering here from Cottage medical practice. Can I please speak with Peter Williams. It's about a patient he's seen before, Lisa McCormack. *(Pause)* Hi Pete, Geoff Pickering here. Thanks for taking my call. Do you remember Lisa McCormack who you saw a couple of years ago with breast cancer? She presented earlier this week with low back pain which sounded pretty suspicious. I organised some xrays and scans, and it looks like she has got widespread bony mets. I was hoping you would be able to see her sooner rather than later. *(pause)* Okay, thanks Pete. She's not going to like the idea of more chemo. If you put me back to your receptionist, I'll make a time for her to see you next week. *Geoff writes on computer.*

Geoff: Patient not present. Bone scan shows multiple mets. Discussed with Peter Williams. He will see her next week. Probably for more chemo. Will inform Lisa today. *Geoff stands and goes behind his chair.*

Geoff: I see her lips, her horror  
I feel my skin crawling helpless  
I see her act finish – curtains  
I feel the cold rippling through

I see her life, my life

Wheels turning

Wheels turning

By Frank Meumann

*Lights fade down.*

## Act 12

*Lights up. Geoff and Lisa return to their seats and face each other. Lisa is wearing a scarf.*

Geoff: So it looks like the treatment is not working as well as we would have liked. The latest scans show that the tumours are still growing. *Silence. Pause/*

Geoff: I think it's getting to the stage where we need to talk about whether it's worth continuing with the chemo. What do you think? *Silence. Pause.*

Geoff: Sometimes people find a spiritual belief can help them at times like this. Do you have a belief system or faith which is helpful for you? *Silence. Geoff turns away from Lisa and starts typing on his computer. Lisa turns away from Geoff.*

Geoff: Further growth of tumours despite chemo. Discussed with Lisa option of stopping chemo and starting palliative treatment. She will discuss family and let me know. Review 1 week.



Lisa: (*Writing in her journal*) Geoff says, “Stop chemo”

What will I cook for dinner? Must hang up the washing.

Geoff says “stop chemo”

How did the kids go at school today? Still need to pay that electricity bill.

Geoff says “stop chemo”

What was that you said?

The possibility of relief?

No more masquerade.

Can I be myself now?

By Peter Silberberg

*Lisa stands and goes behind her chair.*

Lisa: Growth

A seed. A bud. A baby.

A sapling Sun, soil; air and water

Nourish, nurture

Growth

A cell. An invasion. A spread.

Bone, blood, breath and bite

Drain, strangulate

Growth

A blessing. A prayer.  
Spirit, soul and sacrifice.  
Release, revive

Growth

A curse, a sin, a punishment  
Pain, hellfire and poison  
This is not meant to be  
This is not meant to be  
Who dares to tell me  
This is meant to be?

By Claire Noonan

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair*

Geoff: At this moment, I wish to walk away from here. Not away from Lisa, but away. A long way away – to a beach of the tropics, with white sands and blue water. I will sit on that beach and watch the small soldier crabs.

The soldier crab is the size of my thumbnail, delicate in its poise. Marches with purpose. But then at its moment of confrontation, there is no bravado, scarcely even a moment for contemplation. Simply a turn of the body, a flick of the hind leg, and spiraling down into the damp and pure sand. Another twist of the body, a kick of the leg – up pops a tiny ball of

sand. And deeper he goes – away from the blue dream of sky, away from the vast horizons, away from the cooling breezes. Deepening and protecting his fragile form from the moment of threat.

At this moment, I wish to be that gentle soldier crab. Hold my fear in the chasing, hide my emotion from this world and remain in that damp hole, flicking sand balls to the surface.

Lisa, I will be strong and I will support you. But for this moment I am searching for wide sands and blue water.

By Michael Douglas.

*Lights fade down.*

### Act 13

*Lights up. Lisa propped up in bed at home, Geoff sitting on chair beside bed. Bed positioned to side of stage. Desk remains in center stage.*

Geoff: How's the pain going, Lisa? Is it better since we increased the morphine? Lisa: Yeah, it's better during the day, but it's still hard to sleep.

Is there anything I can have to help me sleep? The nights are so long.

Geoff: Yeah, sure, something for the sleep. That's easy. *Pause, Geoff looking visibly upset.*

Geoff: I just wish there was more I could do to make things better for you Lisa.

Lisa: Thanks Geoff, don't you worry. *(Lisa reaches out her hand and rests it on Geoff's)* You've always been fantastic. I wouldn't have got this far without

you. *Geoff returns to his desk and writes on his computer.*

Geoff: Home visit. Pain control better. Sleep difficult. Management – continue MS Contin 40mg BD with 12mg mist morph for breakthrough pain. Add temazepam at night. Review 3 days or sooner if needed.

Lisa: (*Writing in her journal, while lying in bed*) Visit from Geoff today. He looked tired and upset. Was good to see him anyway. I was able to thank him, for everything that he has done. Felt good to say “thank you”. Felt good to lend a hand of support to someone else.

All this caring that people do for me, and finally an opportunity to give something back. Geoff always the constant in my journey. Must be hard being a doctor, looking after the sick every day. I wonder how he copes? I could never do it.... Be a doctor.

By Peter Silberberg

*Lisa sits up and dangles leg over side of her bed.*

Lisa: Morpheus,

God of sleep

Into any veins

Forever seep

If there's no breath

One cannot weep

Now I lay me open wide

Replace my breathing with your tides  
It won't hurt cos I'm dead inside  
If there's no breath  
One cannot weep  
So into my veins  
I bid you seep,  
Morpheus,  
God of sleep

By Claire Noonan

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair.*

Geoff: Morphine for your pain  
Stillness departs from my poise  
Your touch is my balm

By Michael Douglas

*Lights fade down.*

## Act 14

*Lights up. Lisa propped up in bed at home wearing oxygen nasal prongs, Geoff on chair beside bed.*

Geoff: I think it is getting pretty close to the end now Lisa. *Silence.*

Geoff: (*Reaching for Lisa's hand*) It's probably time to finish any things you

have not done yet, especially saying goodbye to people you need to say goodbye to. Have you done any of that yet?

Lisa: Yeah, we had a few of our friends around on the weekend. That was pretty much my way of saying goodbye. *Silence.*

Lisa: I've just about had enough now. I can hardly hold the kids, I'm so weak. But I can't bring myself to leave them. How do you say goodbye to your kids. I don't know how to do that, how to let them go. *Silence. Geoff stands and returns to his desk. He begins typing on his computer as Lisa dies and walks off stage.*

Geoff: Home visit. Rapid deterioration. Becoming short of breath. Not eating. Pain well controlled. Death likely in next few days. Continue daily visits. *Lisa reading her journal entry from off stage.*

Death is coming. I can smell it now, like the scent of new roses in spring. Sweet, enticing, pulling me in.

I'm not afraid. Just worried for those I leave behind. It feels good to be alone now. The need for others has gone.

Morphine.... Memories.... The smell of dad's smoky black and white checkered jumper, the wood incinerators smoke bellowing up..... dog jumping on fly screen..... dog jumping through fly screen.... Being scared of the dark. My god, I can remember that feeling so clearly, needing to check behind me every few steps, but being too afraid to turn. Sitting at the family dinner table. Giggling so hard that the milk came out my nose. First kiss, clashes of braces. How could I have been so embarrassed and so excited at

the same time?

First taste of alcohol – vomiting until I swore I'd never drink again.  
Lover.... loving..... kids.... morphine..... metamorphosis..... metaphysical.....  
mesmerizing mangled mutilated mangoes..... sleep..... sleep....

By Peter Silberberg

*Lisa reading her poem from off stage.*

This is Callum. See Callum run. Callum runs for mummy,

This is Ruby. Hear Ruby sing. Ruby sings for mummy.

The children love their mother

The children need their mother

The children ask their mother

“Why do you want to die?”

No more books in bed at night

No more hugs and holding tight

No more sun and no more fun

Why would you want to die?

But no more pain and ‘out of breath’

No more pills and Dr Geoff

No more fear and scary dreams

That’s why she wants to die

Callum cannot say goodbye  
Ruby cannot say goodbye  
Mummy cannot say goodbye  
But mummy wants to, needs to, has to die.

By Claire Noonan

*Geoff stands and goes behind his chair.*

Geoff: I remember back when you stood bright and cheerfully plucked the petals from the flowers on my desk.

Had you waited, I thought, those delicate petals would fall in their time upon the desk.

But you were bright and cheerful and eager to spread your cheerfulness and enjoy the flowers and the petals and my disdain.

I remember back when you stood bright and spoke gently to my heart of life's joy and its pain.

Had I waited, I thought, those expectant words would carry me and my pain.

But you were bright and cheerful as I walked between my heart and my craft and my hopes for you remained. The petals have fallen upon the desk and now I confess that I still shed my own tears and my own fears.

Had I the strength, I might know what to share and how to share.

The tide is waning

The sun is fading, evening calls upon life.



And I contemplate that I might gather the petals that fall upon my desk and cast them into the waning tide.

By Michael Douglas

*Lights fade down.*

## Act 15

*Lights up. Geoff at his desk, on his own, filling out death certificate.*

Geoff: Medical certificate of cause of death

Name of deceased. Lisa McCormack

Date of death. 24th day of September, 2012

Place of death. 17 Woodford Rd, Ashton

Date of Birth: 28th February, 1975

Age: 38

Did the deceased undergo an operation or procedure within 4 weeks of their death: No

Was the body viewed after death: Yes

Cause of death: metastatic breast cancer

Duration: 2 years

Was an injury or accident involved: No

Was the deceased pregnant within 4 weeks of their death: No

I hereby certify that I am a currently registered medical practitioner and that I was responsible for the medical care of the deceased immediately before

death

Signed, Dr Geoff Pickering, Cottage medical practice, 15 Hillview St,  
Ashton

Dated: 24th September 2010

Geoff tears out completed death certificate, looks up and sighs

Bye Lisa, I'll miss you.

*Lights fade down*

End

### **Reflections on Enduring Witness**

I have been a family doctor in a smallish community in rural Australia for over 25 years. For more than a generation. In this time, I have witnessed my patients grow old with me. I have seen fathers become grandfathers, wives become widows, children become parents. I have witnessed incredible joy and abject sadness. It has been a rich, rewarding, challenging journey. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to share in the lives of so many fine people. It has taken me to places unimaginable when I entered medical school as a green 18 year old so many years ago.

One such unimaginable place was a recent visit as Visiting Professor of Humanities and Medicine to Harvard Medical School in Boston. So how is it that a small town non-academic Australian country doctor is invited to teach at one of the most prestigious institutions in the world?

As with many miraculous journeys in life, the seeds were sown in a

moment which was so ordinary. So mundane. It was impossible to imagine in that instant that it would flourish and transform in the way it has.

It was a Saturday morning clinic at my family practice over 10 years ago. Saturday mornings are reserved for emergency cases which can't wait until Monday. There are no booked appointments. People come and wait their turn. My job is generally to ensure they are safe and comfortable over the weekend. It is high turnover medicine, different to the slower paced considered interactions which occur during the normal working week.

A patient that I will call Sandy had a problem that seemed simple enough. Sore throat. Booked for a minor surgical procedure the following week. Wanted to make sure that she would be fit for the anesthetic. Three times during our conversation she asked me if stress could cause her to get a sore throat. The first two times she asked I managed to avoid the question. It was a Saturday morning after all. But when she asked for the third time as she was leaving, I could ignore it no longer.

"Yes, stress can affect the immune system, and make you more likely to get viral infections. Perhaps if you are feeling stressed, you could come back and see me at a more appropriate time (with emphasis on the word "appropriate") and we could see if there are things to help you feel a little easier."

Next patient.

I didn't give Sandy or her story another thought until she arrived for an appointment a couple of weeks later (at an appropriate time). As things

turned out, she was significantly depressed. It was a complex situation. She had young children. Sandy was a poet, and she didn't like taking the usual antidepressant medications because they stopped her writing. She didn't like the psychologist I recommended for her. She didn't like the psychiatrist I recommended for her.

But Sandy seemed to like me. She would come along weekly, sometimes twice a week. I would sit, listen, support, bear witness. Do my best to help. But it was difficult. For both of us. I would see her walking around town, hunched over, pushing her youngest child in a pram. And I worried. Worried about her. Worried that I was not doing enough. Worried about feeling powerless to make a difference.

I would phone the psychiatrist she had seen (just once, she didn't want to go back) and tell him what was happening. "You are doing very well Hilton," he would assure me. "You are doing a great job. Keep going. I definitely don't need to see her again."

After about 6 or 7 months, Sandy began to improve. She attributed this recovery to being able to write meaningful poetry again. She told me that she had begun to write about her experience with depression. And this was why she was feeling better.

This intrigued me. I knew a little about people who had written their illness narrative and found it helpful. I wanted to know more. So I asked Sandy if she would be willing to show me some of her poems. She was most excited at this thought. More excited than I had seen her in

months.

The next day there was a pile of Sandy's poems waiting for me at my reception desk. I took them home to read during a quiet moment. A few weeks later, late one evening, I reached for the poems and started flicking through them. I saw a poem entitled *And you*. "I wonder if I could be the you in *And you?*" I thought as I began to read the poem. If you knew me well, you would know that I have this massive ego within a highly unevolved personality, and so you would understand that I was hoping to read something positive about my care. Something positive about me. Something along the lines of "without me I would not have got through" would have been what I was hoping to find in the poem.

Talk about setting myself up for a fall! To say that the poem was less than complementary would be an understatement. It ended with the line *Perhaps I should instead seek a vet (Veterinarian)*.

I was gutted. How could this be? After everything I have done for you! You write about me in this way!

I was filled with rage and sadness. I looked towards my usual default strategy for dealing with unpleasant emotions—the glass of red wine sitting on the table next to me. But I knew that there was not enough red wine in the world to quell the feelings within me. And it was late at night. There was no one to talk to.

In this moment, I had a very unusual thought.

This was the moment which changed my life.

The thought went something like "Well, if it was good enough for her to write a poem about me, maybe, just maybe, I could write a poem about her." Now, this was an unusual thought because I hadn't written anything since Grade 4 when Miss Black made us write a poem about our summer vacation. But I did reach for the pen rather than the wine.

The Irish poet Derek Mahon has written a poem called Everything is going to be alright which contains the lines

The poems flow from the hand unbidden

And the hidden source is the watchful heart

This is just what happened for me in that moment. The poem did flow as I paid attention to my aching heart. And the tears flowed too. And I felt better. Much to my surprise. Even better than after a few glasses of wine. My poem might not have been a very good poem but it did allow me to sleep well that night instead of ruminating on my hurt which is what would have been likely if I had instead reached for the red wine.

The next morning I had another thought which propelled me along my journey onto these pages. I thought, "Well, if writing a poem about unpleasant feelings related to my work as a doctor helped me, maybe, just maybe, writing in this way might help other doctors too."

Part of my work at that time involved running educational programs for family medicine doctors, and so with the help of a creative writing teacher, we piloted a series of creative writing workshops for doctors. The independent evaluation of these workshops was very positive, and gave me

confidence to pursue this work further.

Since then I have continued to offer writing workshops for health practitioners. The workshops have the goal of reducing professional isolation and the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue. We use simple fun writing prompts. Participants laugh and cry and share stories and leave refreshed and invigorated. Their writing is profound. These workshops are a small part of my working life but they are immensely enriching and inspiring.

I have also continued to write a little myself. Most of the material I write comes from experiences of loss related to my work. While there is much to celebrate in my work as a family doctor, there is also much to grieve, and writing seems to help me with this important task.

There is a particularly important archetypal medical story which I felt needed telling. I wrote the film script for *Enduring Witness*—The film to tell this story. *Enduring Witness*—The film tells the story of Geoff, a family doctor, and one of his patients. The story is told primarily through the lens of Geoff's point of view. In contemporary culture, there are many patient narratives of loss through cancer and other serious illness, but there has been very little written about the effect these illness journeys have on the professionals who care for them. These effects are magnified in the situation of a family doctor, who often knows the patient very well before they become ill. They then care for them during the illness, share their hopes for recovery and despair at their loss.

I have been involved in (too) many such journeys. I needed to tell this story.

Enduring Witness—The film was my way of telling the story. The words on the pages of the script were brought to life by two wonderful actors and a local production company as we filmed the story. I have since used the 30 minute film as a teaching tool for medical students, doctors in training and established practitioners. It allows for an intimate discussion about the challenging personal aspects of working as a family doctor or health practitioner. These conversations are rare in the medical world, and are cherished by those willing to participate openly. I delight in seeing how something which started as an abstract idea in my head has grown into something substantial. Something that has meaning for such a wide range of people. If these conversations allow doctors to be more human (as comfortable with words as with numbers), then there will be a flow on effect to their patients. In my grandiose moments, I even allow myself to believe that perhaps this work can benefit people I may never even get to meet.

Encouraged by this positive response to Enduring Witness—The film I began dreaming of ways to extend its reach. At some of my writing workshops, I had been playing with the idea of asking participants to write a script (dialogue) of a hypothetical conversation between a doctor and a patient based on the lived experience of one of the workshop participants. But I wanted more than this. I wanted to capture the contrasting voices of



the doctor and the patient. To somehow get into the heads of the two characters in the story. To demonstrate the different levels of reaction to the same conversation.

And so I developed a process to be used in the writing workshops where participants wrote not only a possible dialogue between doctor and patient, but also the deeper hidden thoughts of both characters. Their writing was then performed at the conclusion of the workshop.

This process of writing and performance transformed the initial story shared by one of the workshop participants through the telling of it from different points of view, and with different styles of language. Workshop participants are invariably amazed at how well this seemingly disparate form of writing holds together when performed.

Which brings me to *Enduring Witness*—The play, and this reflection piece. Having been emboldened by the success of the experiments with the *Enduring Witness*—The film and the workshop script writing exercise, I had the idea of combining these concepts into an in-depth exercise for my two day residential writing workshops.

I wanted to use elements of the dialogue from the original *Enduring Witness* – The film script to form the skeleton of the play and to combine this with the script writing exercise from previous workshops. This experiment would be the final writing activity for the workshop, and it would be followed by a performance of the play by two actors doing a live script reading. These were my ideas, and they rattled around in my head for

some time. I was too nervous to take the next step. What if it was a flop? If it didn't work? But the idea would not leave me alone. The power of the idea finally overcame my fear, and I planned to include this process into an upcoming workshop.

Copies of the dialogue for the 15 acts of the play were printed for workshop participants along with blank pages for insertion of the patient's journal entries and poems and the doctor's poems for each act. All was in readiness.

After a germination which began years earlier with a simple Saturday morning visit to my family medicine clinic, through a gestation which included:

- caring for a significantly depressed patient
- reading one of her poems (with high expectations of praise) which was scathing in its representation of the care I had offered her deciding to reach for the pen rather than the red wine to write the first poem of my adult life in an attempt to deal with the powerful emotions I was experiencing after reading her poem
- having the idea of offering writing workshops for health practitioners to help them deal with the powerful emotions they face as a result of their work
- having the need to tell the story of the long term relationship between a fictional family doctor and one of his patients (Enduring Witness)

- the evolution of the writing workshops to include the writing of a brief performance piece based on real life experiences of a workshop participant which looked at the experiences and reactions of the patient and practitioner from different points of view
- the persisting idea of combining elements from *Enduring Witness* —The film with the process of writing the performance piece within the workshops

It was time to deliver this baby!

And so the baby was delivered at a pre-conference writing workshop prior to 2013 *Examined Life* conference in Iowa, USA. This was followed by the birth of a sibling at a weekend writing workshop in Lennox Head, Australia later that year.

Despite my nerves, the deliveries went very smoothly on both occasions. As usually happens in these workshops, the writing was beautiful, poignant, funny, insightful and inspiring. And the process worked well. On both occasions, there was a degree of uncertainty from participants. They were unsure whether they would be able to produce something of value in a relatively short time. But I was confident in their ability and the final products completely vindicated this confidence.

*Enduring witness* – The play contains writing from the 2013 Lennox Head workshop. It includes contributions from the 17 workshop participants. Each participant contributed 3 or 4 short pieces. The participants were a mixture of experienced family doctors, residents,

psychologists, a medical receptionist and a medical journalist. Most of them did not know each other prior to the workshop. They came from all over Australia. Apart from the journalist, none of them were experienced writers.

And yet despite these potential barriers, they managed to transform their previous life experiences (and my ideas) into a moving piece of theatre. They overcame their hesitation and fear about writing. By some magical process, a strong thread bound their contributions to the play without any collaboration between them during the writing process. When their play was performed for them at the conclusion of the workshop, there were tears all around, even though they knew how the story was going to end.

I too was deeply moved by this experience. Moved by their courage to have a go at quite a challenging writing exercise. Moved by their wisdom and compassion. Moved that a simple series of ideas could grow into something tangible. I hope that you too were moved at some level when you read *Enduring Witness—The play*.

And so I owe Sandy a great debt of gratitude. Her openness and honesty in sharing her pain with me via her poems has transformed my life. The energy of my initial feelings of grief and rage in response to her poems has been harnessed to drive me on a journey from the depths of despair to an opening and an awaking – for myself, for my workshop participants and hopefully for their patients. Most importantly, though, it has given me the

confidence to trust in my creative thought processes, and to be emboldened to have a go with the experiments outlined in this article. I wonder where the road will lead me next?

**Hilton Koppe, MD** is a family practitioner in Lennox Head, a small village on east coast of Australia. He has been involved in medical education since 1990, and is respected as an innovative and inspiring teacher. In recent years, Hilton has been involved in developing programs exploring the interface between the arts and medicine, with particular emphasis on using creative writing as a tool for burnout prevention. He is regularly invited to present his workshops around Australia, NZ, USA and Europe.

137

# The Screen Door Unlatches: A Chapter

Masha C. Harris

It was the middle of July, and at 10 a.m. I was already sweating, moisture slick on the insides of my elbows and knees. I was outside, sitting on the back porch steps, hoping for a breeze. None came.

The garden looked amazing. The grass was lush around the big oak tree and lining the path that meandered through the yard. Everywhere you looked, there were flowers. Red and pink and yellow, sky-blue and velvety purple. The roses, as promised, were in bloom. I could smell them from where I sat.

Mama had read Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Secret Garden* to me more than once in the past few years, and I'd always dreamed of having a garden of my own. True, this one wasn't hedged in and overrun with wild roses, but it was certainly an improvement.

Our yard had never looked very good. It was one of the things kids at school teased me about. Cousin Christina had arranged for Sid Alkens, an enormous seventh grader who terrified me, to mow the lawn for us. But mow was all he did. Until Mr. Benny started coming over, the bushes had been sprouting enormous weeds, and baby maple trees had taken root here and there. There were old flowerpots, filthy and cracked, framing the front door. Weeds as tall as me grew from the places Sid couldn't get the mower into – or at least pretended he couldn't. Of course no one said anything.

Sid did a good job, Mama and I told each other. I never told her about the kids at school.

Since Mr. Benny had started coming over, the garden, the entire lawn, had *color*. I used to go across the street sometimes, or way to the edge of the fence in back, and look up at our house. The weeds had made everything look grey, which accentuated the peeling paint and dirty windows. Somehow, with his touch, the grass had become a vibrant green, and the flowers accented the peach paint and grey-blue trim, making it look less like an ugly old house with peeling paint and more like an important, historical building.

Bored with sitting on the porch, I ran inside; the screen door slammed behind me. I ran straight upstairs to my room.

“Joanna?” Mama stood at the bedroom door. She was dressed! Her dress almost looked like a nightgown, but not quite. It looked more like the dresses the girls wore on the covers of the *Little House on the Prairie* books: long-sleeved, floral print, with buttons all the way down the front. It fell to her ankles, and beneath it she wore her fuzzy slippers. So maybe she wasn’t *quite* dressed.

“You look beautiful, Mama!” I ran up and gave her a hug, which she returned slowly, awkwardly.

“Thank you,” she said. “It looks really nice outside.” Mama was always trying to get me to go outside, summer or winter, rain or shine, which I sometimes balked at. In my seven and a half years I had not once

seen my mother leave the house, at least not more than a few steps to pick up a package on the stoop. Why should I have to go outside if she didn't? Today, though, I didn't feel like arguing. I had planned to go back out anyway.

"I know!" I opened my closet door, set aside two shoebox-sized bins, took out the one beneath them, and then set them back where they belonged. I held up the green-lidded bin I'd just pulled out. "I just came up to get my cars."

"Good girl." She stood aside to let me by, and I hopped back down the stairs happily. I loved Mama's good days. She would cook supper tonight.

I *loved* my Matchbox cars. I loved them with the passion that most little girls loved baby dolls and plastic kitchenettes. The cars were something like dolls, to me: they each had a name, a personality, and their own personal drama going on at any given moment.

I played with the cars in the same place every time. Their small city spanned between the confines of The River – the stone path that snaked across the yard – and The Mountains – the roots of the big oak tree.

My favorite car, the one whose story I most frequently narrated, was a sparkly violet convertible named Victory. She was seven like me and also sometimes felt like her mother, a white car named Sylvia, didn't love her. Today I picked up where I'd left off last time I'd played with the cars: Victory had run away from home! She was hiding among the roots, in the



mountains.

No one noticed that Victory was gone. Not the Pickup Brothers, not the limousine, and especially not Sylvia. Victory sniffled, but nobody heard her.

Then Maroony rolled up. Maroony was a beat-up old car with the squared frame of the cars made twenty or thirty years ago. Maroony was the same color as Mr. Benny's favorite sweater.

"Hey, where's Victory?" he asked. He drove around from car to car, but nobody had seen her. "Okay, everybody gather round!" he cried, and soon a search party embarked into the mountains.

"Hey there, Joanna!"

I jumped up. "Mr. Benny!" I ran over, leaving my cars behind.

He hugged me. "How are you, darling?"

Ever since school had ended and Mr. Benny started coming over nearly every day to work in the yard, he had become much more affectionate, calling me things like "honey" and "darling". I preened. "I'm good! What are you doing today?" I asked.

"Weeding!"

"*Again?*"

"It's a job that never ends," he told me very seriously.

"Can I help?"

Mr. Benny stooped down and opened up his canvas backpack. "You know, I just happened to find this in my garage..." He reached in

and pulled out a small garden claw with a purple handle!

I squealed. “Can I try it?”

“It’s for you.”

“To *keep*?”

“That’s right.” He handed it to me, and then pulled his own, slightly larger claw from the bag. “Let’s start over here.” He stood up and we walked over to a flowerbed near the fence gate.

I surveyed the flowerbed. “You’re right,” I said. “There *are* weeds.”

“We’ll take care of that. You remember how I showed you?”

I nodded.

“Okay! You take the right, and I’ll take the left.”

“Sounds good!”

We worked together in silence. I was practically vibrating with happiness. My very own purple claw! And a garden to use it in.

I was so intent at weeding that for a second I didn’t realize the sound I heard was out of place. It sounded like the screen door unlatching. I stopped working and glanced at Mr. Benny. He was still next to me, which made sense, since there were no *misters* allowed in 22 Farrar Street. He looked up, glancing at me with a furrowed brow to match my own. Slowly, we turned to look at the door.

Mama stood on the porch, a large glass of lemonade in each hand. Her dark hair was pulled back away from her face, and she’d even switched

her slippers for a sturdy pair of black shoes. Aside from the long sleeves, out of place in the July sun, she looked... just like any other mother.

Seeing my mother outdoors both thrilled and terrified me. It suggested a sort of normalcy I had never allowed myself to dream of: a mama to come to teacher conferences, to run to the grocery store for milk. One who would walk me to school, and bring me to doctor's appointments, and take me trick-or-treating. Still, I had seen Mama exhaust herself before, trying to do too much and then crashing, and I was wary. I wasn't going to let myself trust it. But how I wanted to trust it!

Mama said nothing and didn't look at either of us, but she set the glasses down on the wicker table and sat in a matching chair. Mr. Benny got up slowly and approached the porch as if he were approaching a frightened animal, which I guess in a way, he was. I watched, hoping she wouldn't bolt.

He kept his distance as he reached the porch, and when he drew the wicker chair opposite her away from the table, he put so much space between them that he couldn't reach the table. He rested the glass of lemonade on his knee. He said nothing, just smiled peacefully.

I stood up, then crept back over to the big oak tree and my Matchbox cars. I knew this was a time to use my ears, not my eyes. I pretended to be playing like usual, but Maroony rolled back and forth, desultory.

It was so quiet for so long that I wondered if Mama had gone back inside and I just hadn't heard her. I sneaked a glance. They were both

sipping their lemonades. Mama's glass was shaking as she held it to her mouth. I looked back at the roots of the big oak tree. Finally Mama spoke, though I could barely hear her. "The roses are beautiful."

"Thank you." Then there was more silence. I wondered why Mr. Benny didn't say anything more – but he didn't.

"You're so good with her. I'm so glad you got paired together." I thought I actually heard a smile in her voice as she added, "Although I maintain she does *not* need a speech therapist."

He chuckled. "You may be right about that."

In the quiet that followed I pictured them sipping their lemonades. I wondered if Mama's hand was shaking less.

I wondered if she was smiling. "Joanna's a wonderful child," Mr. Benny said. "It's been a pleasure to work with her, both at school and here in the garden."

"I almost named her Phoenix," Mama almost interrupted, talking faster and louder than the way she'd spoken before. I heard her chair shift as she sat forward. "Born of the ashes, you know?"

Mr. Benny nodded. "I can see how that would be appropriate."

"But then I thought it might perpetuate..." Her voice trailed off.

Then there was nothing, for a long, long time.

I glanced over and could immediately tell that Mama had gone Away.

"Charlotte?" Mr. Benny asked, quiet. "Are you alright?" I hadn't

known he knew her name.

I stood and trudged up the porch steps. I hated dealing with Mama when she went Away. It hadn't happened for a long time, and I'd almost let myself believe it would never happen again.

When Mama went Away, her eyes were suddenly vacant; she stared, her gaze never shifting, but didn't seem to see anything. Sometimes she shivered. Sometimes she rocked. And sometimes she sat like a stone for hours. I had grown adept over the last year or so at dealing with Mama's Away times. While I could only rarely get her to come completely back, I was usually able to get her to her bed.

I stood next to her, careful not to touch her. "Mama?" I whispered.

She started rocking back and forth a little, which I took as a good sign. It meant she'd heard me. "Mama, let's go inside."

She nodded very, very slowly. "I think that's a good idea," she said.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mr. Benny wince. Mama's Away voice used to scare me too, but it didn't anymore. It just made me sad. Nothing happened for a long time. I shifted my weight from foot to foot, uncomfortable. Finally I repeated, "Mama. Let's go inside."

She stood abruptly and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I'm sorry," she said. Her eyes still weren't focused, but her voice was closer to normal.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Mr. Benny replied, and internally I cheered. I would spend the next several weeks repeating these very words

as Mama endlessly relived these very moments. His authority, being able to say *Mr. Benny said*, would go a long way in making things better.

Mama nodded once, then spun around – I hopped out of the way just in time – and ran inside. The screen door, then the entry door slammed, and I heard all four deadbolts snap shut.

Mr. Benny and I didn't move for a few beats. Then he stood up and, all business, demanded, "Did she just lock you out?"

I shrank at his angry tone. "It's okay," I squeaked. "Look." I tugged the ribbon out from beneath my t-shirt and showed him the keys to the front door. I never, ever took it off, not even in the bath. "These go to the front door," I told him, more brightly than I felt. "There's nothing to worry about."

Mr. Benny pulled out his cell phone, and my heart began to race. Who would he call? "Joanna, I can't leave you with your mother like this." *Then don't leave*, I thought. I had almost hoped for a moment like this. With Mama sick, Mr. Benny would have to take me home with him. I could meet Stuart, his cat, and see the tropical fish he'd told me about. I could sleep in his bed with my head on his shoulder and he could keep me safe. Maybe I could stay forever.

"Who can I call to come get you?"

My heart sank. I recited Cousin Christina's phone number.

He dialed. "Hi, is this Christina? This is Ben Fairchild... yes, yes... Charlotte isn't doing so well. I'm here with Joanna now but I don't want to

leave her alone... That's excellent. I appreciate it... See you soon." He looked at me. "She'll be right over. Why don't we sit down and have some lemonade?" He sat.

I sat too, and then looked at him, puzzled. He just didn't seem like himself. "Are you mad at me?" I asked, and then I started to sob. It was too much to hear Mr. Benny's voice hard and sharp, talking like a grown-up.

For the first time since Mama had shut the door, his face softened, and he looked like my Mr. Benny again. "Oh, honey, no." His soft voice soothed me like always, and my tears began to dry up. "I'm worried about your mama," he went on. "It's not good for you to be here when she's like this."

"Why does Cousin Christina have to come? Can't I go home with you?" I held my breath, hoping for the answer I wanted. I didn't receive it. "I'm a lonely old man," he said, and I giggled. "I can't have a little girl in my house – I wouldn't know the first thing about how to take care of her! Your cousin Christina has kids of her own. She can take care of you better."

"Okay," I said, trying not to sound as disappointed as I felt.

He smiled. "How's that lemonade?" I'd barely touched it.

I picked it up and took a sip. "A little watery," I said.

"Yeah, mine too."

"It's still good, though."

“I was just about to say that!”

We sat for a few minutes in silence. Then I stood up. “Maybe I should go in and see how Mama’s doing.”

Mr. Benny reached over, gently took my arm, and led me back down into my seat. “I think your mama needs to be alone right now.”

I shrugged.

“So tell me about your cousin Christina’s house. Do you like it there?”

I nodded. Then I couldn’t take it anymore. “Mama’s not usually like that. She doesn’t go Away a lot, I swear. She’ll be fine in a couple hours,” I blurted. The first two were half-truths, but I knew the third was a downright lie. Mama would stay in bed for days after this.

“Joanna, I’ve spoken to your cousin about this. From what I understand, you’re allowed to stay here with your mama if she’s doing okay, but if not, you *must* go to Christina’s house. Is that right?”

I nodded again.

“Joanna, how often do you stay here and not tell anybody when your mama’s sick?”

I gasped. He knew. How could he know? The question rattled off the walls of my brain, repeating over and over. *How often do you stay here and not tell anybody when your mama’s sick?* I thought about answering. *All the time,* I would say. *I burned myself on the stove cooking supper and it hurt.* Or maybe, *I wish she would tell me when she was going to get sick.* Or maybe, *If I told, I’d never*



*see my mama again.*

Instead, I sat up a little straighter, looked Mr. Benny straight in the eye, and said, “That never happens. I always tell right away.”

He looked back at me and nodded sadly. “That’s what I suspected.”

And then we sat in silence until Cousin Christina came.

### **Reflection: The Screen Door Unlatches**

Characters come fully formed into my brain, and they always have. I’ve been writing since before I could actually *write* – my mother would transcribe my stories, and I illustrated them. I have never sat down and thought to myself, “Gee, I need a character,” or even “Gee, I like this character but she needs to be fleshed out.” Rather, they come into my mind whole, demanding to be written. I know them intimately, immediately, and they will not leave my head until I write them out of it.

I got the idea for my novel-in-progress, from which *The Screen Door Unlatches* comes, directly upon release from a three-month stay in a psychiatric hospital. For twenty years I had dealt with constant suicidal ideation, self-harm, and the disorganized thinking I referred to as “noise”. Crisis after crisis finally led me to residential treatment, during which I was diagnosed with trauma and began putting together the pieces of a long-buried history of sexual abuse. With the help of a wonderful psychiatrist, I

began to feel things I hadn't felt since childhood: trust, hope, security. I started a journal, quickly filled it, and moved on to a second. It was a time of near-constant writing.

But it wasn't until I came home that these characters you've just been reading about came into my head. Suddenly, there was Joanna. This is what I immediately knew about Joanna: Her mother was agoraphobic, and she had brought her up using phrases in foreign languages interchangeably with English. So when Joanna got to school, she didn't know one language from another. And there was Mr. Benny, the speech therapist, assigned the task of teaching her to distinguish English from other languages. And then there was the scene when Mr. Benny came to visit Joanna's mother and, despite her rudeness towards men ("Well, we don't allow any *misters* in this house, *Mister Benny*"), fell in love.

And then there was Charlotte.

By making Joanna's mother, rather than the child herself, a rape victim, I was able to examine my own adult behaviors – dissociation, self-injury, fear of men – from the point of view of a child. My work at the hospital made me focus on myself as a child – *Little Maria* – and I was struggling to understand how that little girl became a woman whose pain was so severe she felt she couldn't live. Joanna helped me to look at that woman with compassion, with love, and with curiosity.

Mr. Benny, then, was a way to examine what happened when those good feelings, the trust and hope and security, are introduced into the lives

of both child and adult. As you've seen in *The Screen Door Unlatches*, these feelings are not always easy to deal with. The adult, in severe pain, tries to get close to the feelings but is terrified, and ultimately can't handle it – at first, in this chapter, at least. Meanwhile the child, starved for the love the adult can't give her, devours them.

Through the creation of these characters, I have been able to challenge my thoughts and beliefs. The writing allows me to examine myself from several different viewpoints, and this increases my understanding of myself. Since beginning to write this piece, I have learned that part of me is afraid of accepting positive changes, but another part wants them desperately. I've been able to look at myself from the viewpoint of the child I once was. And it has allowed me to love all three characters – the child, the adult, and the representation of hope and safety. Writing *The Screen Door Unlatches* has truly been a transformative process.

**Maria (Masha) Harris** is an artist, writer and librarian living in Houston, Texas. She has been previously published in Potash Hill, the literary magazine of Marlboro College. She spends her free time creating art or working on her first novel, accompanied by a dog named Lemon.