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### Mid-Summer Writing Retreat

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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# *Mid-Summer Writing Retreat*

*Turning Point: The Center for Hope and Healing  
Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg \* August, 2019*

## *Ground Rules*

1. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, and most of all, making sense.
2. Write what you know as well as what you don't know.
3. Follow your writing, not the suggested exercise, the facilitator or what you think you should write. Write what wakes you up the most.
4. Feel free to experiment with poems, stories, dialogues, essays, letters, and whatever other form the writing wants to be.
5. Practice trust. Trust yourself to write what you need to write, how you need to write it.
6. Remember that all revealed in this workshop is confidential.
7. Treat all newborn writing with great respect and tenderness so that it can grow.
8. Reading your writing aloud is always optional.
9. No self-deprecating remarks allowed (especially when preparing to read your work).
10. Strive, as much as possible, not to compare your writing with the writing of others, and not to critique, interpret or analyze away what your writing is trying to show you.
11. Witness others. Listen carefully with your full attention. It will enhance your ability to listen to your own words.
12. Please share your responses to one another's work—what moves you, what stands out for you – but please refrain from critiquing or analyzing the work.
13. Treat all you do as a delicious and invigorating experiment. Play. Take chances. See what way leads to way, and what words lead to words.

## *Writing Prompts*

1. Consider a moment when something or someone helped take the hurt out of your heart, and write about it.

### **Meadowlark Mending Song**

What hurt you today  
was taken out of your heart  
by the meadowlark  
who slipped the silver needle  
of her song  
in and out of the grey day  
and mended what was torn.  
~ Margaret Hasse

2. Write about the most loving or beautiful or healing things your heart will always remember.

### **What the Heart Cannot Forget**

Everything remembers something. The rock its fiery bed,  
cooling and fissuring into cracked pieces, the rub  
of watery fingers along its edge.

The cloud remembers being elephant, camel, giraffe,  
remembers being a veil over the face of the sun,  
gathering itself together for the fall.

The turtle remembers the sea, sliding over and under  
its belly; remembers legs like wings, escaping down  
the sand under the beaks of savage birds.

The tree remembers the story of each ring, the years  
of drought, the floods, the way things came  
walking slowly towards it long ago.  
And the skin remembers its scars, and bone aches  
where it was broken. The feet remember the dance,  
and the arms remember lifting up the child.

The heart remembers everything it loved and gave away,  
everything it lost and found again, and everyone  
it loved, the heart cannot forget.  
~ Joyce Sutphen

3. Write with abandon about a moment when you felt great joy. Or write a song you love that has grown larger in you over time.

### **What Cathal Said**

“You can sing sweet  
and get the song sung  
but to get to the third dimension  
you have to sing it  
rough, hurt the tune a little. Put  
enough strength to it  
that the notes slip. Then  
something else happens. The song  
gets large.”  
~ Tess Gallagher

3. Riffing off "Why all this music?" write about what the music of life is to you -- whether it's actual moment or other arts, gifts, ways of seeing and being that lift you up or make your heart dance.

### **To Be Alive**

To be alive: not just the carcass  
But the spark.  
That's crudely put, but...  
If we're not supposed to dance,  
Why all this music?  
~ Gregory Orr

3. Consider how nothing happens twice in precisely the same way, and write about something you witnessed or experienced in the last week as if it was happening for the first time. Another way to say this: write about something you now see with new eyes.

### **Nothing Twice**

Nothing can ever happen twice.  
In consequence, the sorry fact is  
that we arrive here improvised  
and leave without the chance to practice.

Even if there is no one dumber,  
if you're the planet's biggest dunce,  
you can't repeat the class in summer:  
this course is only offered once.

No day copies yesterday,  
no two nights will teach what bliss is  
in precisely the same way,  
with precisely the same kisses.

One day, perhaps some idle tongue  
mentions your name by accident:  
I feel as if a rose were flung  
into the room, all hue and scent.

The next day, though you're here with me,  
I can't help looking at the clock:  
A rose? A rose? What could that be?  
Is it a flower or a rock?

Why do we treat the fleeting day  
with so much needless fear and sorrow?  
It's in its nature not to stay:  
Today is always gone tomorrow.

With smiles and kisses, we prefer  
to seek accord beneath our star,  
although we're different (we concur)  
just as two drops of water are.  
~ Wislawa Szymborska

4. Start with any line from this poem, and go, go, go!

### **Wild Geese**

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting----  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.  
~ Mary Oliver

5. Write about what you find at the limit of what you most wish for, or take a line from this poem to use as a diving board into your own writing.

### **Go to the Limits of Your Longing**

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,  
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:  
You, sent out beyond your recall,  
go to the limits of your longing.

Embody me.  
Flare up like a flame  
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.  
Just keep going. No feeling is final.  
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.  
You will know it by its seriousness.  
Give me your hand.  
~ Rainer Maria-Rilke, translated by Stephen Mitchell

6. Write about the language of something or someone not human. For example, you could write about the language the birds make with their patterns of migration, the language of the wind through the trees, or the language of a dearly departed beloved who gives you signs.

Tired of all who come with words, word but no language  
I went to the snow-covered island.  
The wild does not have words.  
The unwritten pages spread themselves out in all directions!  
I come across the marks of roe-deer's hooves in the snow.  
Language, but no words.  
~ Tomas Tranströmer

7. Write your own poem about what -- as specifically as possible -- gives you assurance.

### **Assurance**

You will never be alone, you hear so deep  
a sound when autumn comes. Yellow  
pulls across the hills and thrums,  
or the silence after lightning before it says  
its names – and then the clouds' wide-mouthed  
apologies. You were aimed from birth:  
you will never be alone. Rain  
will come, a gutter filled, an Amazon,  
long aisles – you never heard so deep a sound,  
moss on rock, and years. You turn your head –  
that's what the silence meant: you're not alone.  
The whole wide world pours down.  
~ William Stafford

For more about Caryn, please see <http://carynmiriamgoldberg.com>  
Please see our Turning Points writers blog: <http://mytreecalledlife.wordpress.com>. Send writing to  
Sherri Buerky <[sherrisbeads@gmail.com](mailto:sherrisbeads@gmail.com)>