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March 2023

### Writing for Curiosity and Community

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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#### Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "Writing for Curiosity and Community" (2023). *Workshop Handouts*. 3.  
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**Writing for Curiosity and Community**  
**Turning Point: The Center for Hope & Healing**  
**March 25, 2020 \* Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg**

***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. It may seem counter-intuitive to look at this season as the best season in your life, but consider what is vital, beautiful, and healing right now, and write.

Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn,  
a cool breeze in summer, snow in winter.

If your mind isn't crowded with ten thousand things,  
this is the best season of your life.

~ Wu-Men

2. What does the earth say to you right now?

**In Response to a Question**

The earth says have a place, be what that place  
requires; hear the sound the birds imply  
and see as deep as ridges go behind  
each other. (Some people call their scenery flat,

their only picture framed by what they know:  
I think around them rise a riches and a loss  
too equal for their chart – but absolutely tall.)

The earth says every summer have a ranch  
that's minimum: one tree, one well, a landscape  
that proclaims a universe – sermon  
of the hills, hallelujah mountain,  
highway guided by the way the world is tilted,  
reduplication of mirage, flat evening:  
a kind of ritual for the wavering.

The earth says where you live wear the kind  
of color that your life is (gray shirt for me)  
and by listening with the same bowed head that sings  
draw all into one song, joining  
the sparrow on the lawn, and row that easy  
way, the rage without met by the wings  
within that guide you anywhere the wind blows.

Listening, I think that's what the earth says.  
~ William Stafford

3. Write of a garden, or a place that commemorates a loved one.

### **Columbarium Garden**

Cold sun brings this mourning season to an end  
one year since my mother's death. Last winter thaw  
my brother shoveled clay-dirt, she called it gumbo,  
over powdery substance the crematorium sent us  
not her, but fine, lightened granules—all else  
rendered into invisible elements. That handful  
from the pouch, un-boxed, was tucked into plotted soil,  
the churchyard columbarium, under a brass plaque  
and brick retaining wall, scant semblance of permanence.  
Now my mother is a garden—lilies and chrysanthemums  
feeding from that slight, dampened, decomposing ash.  
Her voice stilled. One ruddy robin in the grass, dipping.  
– Denise Low

4. Describe where light is in your life, or could be, no matter how small. Or take a line from this poem that speaks to you, and repeat it, each time unfolding what it means to you.

### **the laughing heart**

your life is your life.  
don't let it be clubbed into dank  
submission.  
be on the watch.  
there are ways out.  
there is light somewhere.  
it may not be much light but  
it beats the  
darkness  
be on the watch.  
the gods will offer you  
chances.  
know them, take them.  
you can't beat death but  
you can beat death  
in life,  
sometimes.  
and the more often you  
learn to do it,  
the more light there will  
be.  
your life is your life.  
know it while you have  
it.  
you are marvelous  
the gods wait to delight  
in  
you.  
~ Charles Bukowski

5. Write a description of one of the happiest days in your life.

### **The Happiest Day**

It was early May, I think  
a moment of lilac or dogwood  
when so many promises are made  
it hardly matters if a few are broken.  
My mother and father still hovered  
in the background, part of the scenery  
like the houses I had grown up in,  
and if they would be torn down later  
that was something I knew  
but didn't believe. Our children were asleep  
or playing, the youngest as new  
as the new smell of the lilacs,

and how could I have guessed  
their roots were shallow  
and would be easily transplanted.  
I didn't even guess that I was happy.  
The small irritations that are like salt  
on melon were what I dwelt on,  
though in truth they simply  
made the fruit taste sweeter.  
So we sat on the porch  
in the cool morning, sipping  
hot coffee. Behind the news of the day--  
strikes and small wars, a fire somewhere--  
I could see the top of your dark head  
and thought not of public conflagrations  
but of how it would feel on my bare shoulder.  
If someone could stop the camera then...  
if someone could only stop the camera  
and ask me: are you happy?  
perhaps I would have noticed  
how the morning shone in the reflected  
color of lilac. Yes, I might have said  
and offered a steaming cup of coffee.  
~ Linda Pastan

6. Describe an ordinary day when your life changed.

### **Day Like Any Other**

Such insignificance: a glance  
at your record on the doctor's desk  
or a letter not meant for you.  
How could you have known? It's not true  
that your life passes before you  
in rapid motion, but your watch  
suddenly ticks like an amplified heart,  
the hands freezing against a white  
that is a judgment. Otherwise nothing.  
The face in the mirror is still yours.  
Two men pass on the sidewalk  
and do not stare at your window.  
Your room is silent, the plants  
locked inside their mysterious lives  
as always. The queen-of-the-night  
refuses to bloom, does not accept  
your definition. It makes no sense,  
your scanning the street for a traffic snarl,  
a new crack in the pavement,

a flag at half-mast -- signs  
of some disturbance in the world  
because your friend, the morning sun,  
has turned its dark side toward you.  
~ Lisel Mueller

7. Using the phrase "to be human is to..." write, and feel free to repeat this phrase as often as needed to jump-start more words and thoughts.

To be human  
is to become visible  
while carrying  
what is hidden  
as a gift for others.

To remember  
the other world  
in this world  
is to live in your  
true inheritance.

You are not  
a troubled guest  
on this earth,  
you are not  
an accident  
amidst other accidents

you were invited  
from another and greater  
night  
than the one  
from which  
you have just emerged.  
~ David Whyte

8. Write a lullaby as a poem, song, or love letter to yourself or someone else, aiming for specific images (what you can see, touch, taste, smell, and feel) that convey calmness and peace.

9. Write your own prayer in or to spring.

### **A Prayer in Spring**

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers to-day;  
And give us not to think so far away  
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here  
All simply in the springing of the year.

Oh, give us pleasure in the orchard white,  
Like nothing else by day, like ghosts by night;  
And make us happy in the happy bees,  
The swarm dilating round the perfect trees.

And make us happy in the darting bird  
That suddenly above the bees is heard,  
The meteor that thrusts in with needle bill,  
And off a blossom in mid air stands still.

For this is love and nothing else is love,  
The which it is reserved for God above  
To sanctify to what far ends He will,  
But which it only needs that we fulfil.

10. Write your own instructions on not giving up.

### **Instructions on Not Giving Up**

More than the fuchsia funnels breaking out  
of the crabapple tree, more than the neighbor's  
almost obscene display of cherry limbs shoving  
their cotton candy-colored blossoms to the slate  
sky of Spring rains, it's the greening of the trees  
that really gets to me. When all the shock of white  
and taffy, the world's baubles and trinkets, leave  
the pavement strewn with the confetti of aftermath,  
the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin  
growing over whatever winter did to us, a return  
to the strange idea of continuous living despite  
the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then,  
I'll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf  
unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I'll take it all.  
~ Ada Limon

## Writing Care Package

In the challenging times we're in and that are ahead, here are some writing exercises you can use to find and rediscover your words, stories, and wisdom.

1. Lists: Make lists of various fence-post moments -- moments when your life changed in big, little, or medium ways -- on any of these themes or other topics that come to you:

- Who and what you love.
- Beauty and wonder you've witnessed
- Firsts -- first love, first car, first job, first marriage, first diagnosis, first house, etc.
- Places you've traveled or lives.
- Houses you've lived in, and stories that stay with you from each house.
- All the cars you've owned and what stories/trips you've experienced in each.
- Important occasions and rites of passage: weddings, births, christenings and bar mitzvahs, funerals, family reunions or gatherings.
- Holidays that you remember with fondness from your whole life.
- Values: what qualities do you value most and try to keep growing in yourself, and why these matter so much to you.

2. Writing Dates: Even when we can't leave our homes, we can "meet" with people to write together via Zoom (free accounts allow you up to 45 minutes with a few people on the meeting), phone or Facetime, and other ways of meeting.

3. Blog Posts: This is a perfect time to send Sherri material for our blog - <http://mytre recalledlife.wordpress.com>. You can email her at [sherrisbeads@gmail.com](mailto:sherrisbeads@gmail.com).

4. Penpals: You can find and start writing to a penpal, and if you wish, you can sign up for my "A Prompt A Day" email and penpal matching service (free, a donation of your choice, or \$30). [www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.com](http://www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.com) (more resources at my site for writing too).