

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Workshop Handouts

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection

March 2023

Writing in the New Year

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_handouts

Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "Writing in the New Year" (2023). *Workshop Handouts*. 4.
https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_handouts/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Workshop Handouts by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lfthompson@pittstate.edu.

Writing in the New Year

Turning Point: The Center for Hope & Healing
Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg * January, 2021

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. You can put responses in the chat box.
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. Write toward your own discovery of “what I want” or “what we want,” aiming for specifics that come to you.

What We Want

What we want
is never simple.
We move among the things
we thought we wanted:
a face, a room, an open book
and these things bear our names--
now they want us.
But what we want appears
in dreams, wearing disguises.
We fall past,
holding out our arms
and in the morning
our arms ache.
We don't remember the dream,
but the dream remembers us.
It is there all day
as an animal is there
under the table,
as the stars are there
even in full sun.
~ Linda Pastan

2. Write a list for yourself of how to be a writer or seeker or lover or whatever else comes to you.

How To Be a Poet

(to remind myself)

How to Be a Poet

(to remind myself)

i
Make a place to sit down.
Sit down. Be quiet.
You must depend upon
affection, reading, knowledge,
skill—more of each

than you have—inspiration,
work, growing older, patience,
for patience joins time
to eternity. Any readers
who like your poems,
doubt their judgment.

ii

Breathe with unconditional breath
the unconditioned air.
Shun electric wire.
Communicate slowly. Live
a three-dimensional life;
stay away from screens.
Stay away from anything
that obscures the place it is in.
There are no unsacred places;
there are only sacred places
and desecrated places.

iii

Accept what comes from silence.
Make the best you can of it.
Of the little words that come
out of the silence, like prayers
prayed back to the one who prays,
make a poem that does not disturb
the silence from which it came.
~ Wendell Berry

3. People say that we only have 20/20 vision in hindsight. Brainstorm a list of what the year 2020 has given you 20/20 vision for regarding your life, your community, what humans are capable of, what qualities and strengths you have, and all else that applies.

4. Write your own piece about how you go on, or take a phrase like – *You walk a little. You stop. You hurt./ And then you go on.*-- or another phrase that comes to you and use it throughout your writing.

A Cautionary

How do you get through this life
with its broken keyboards, its green awnings in the rain,
a battered tree top and a broken knife?
(the old man complained).
You walk a little. You stop. You hurt.
And then you go on.

Why was there nothing, and then something

and here became ocean and there became plain.
And what can we do about everything?
(the young girl asked, performing a curtsy).
You walk a little. You stop. You hurt.
And then you go on.

What if he or she dies? What if she or he dies?
If you can't trust even a Presbyterian
who will water the zinnias? Who will rack up the skies?
(questioned the woman wringing her hands).
You walk a little. You stop. You hurt.
And then you go on.

Do you know the way to San Jose? What tripped up Sisyphus?
Who took the noodles from my Ramen soup and when
were you going to tell me? Can I survive all this?
(said the madman, a gun to his head).
You walk a little. You stop. You hurt.
And then you go on.

Isn't this nonsense? Isn't advice
a joke in the ear, a clot on the brain?
One lie to another, just to be nice
(sneered the face in the crowd who once had my name).
You walk a little. You stop. You hurt.
And then you go on.
~ Dick Allen

5. What would the teller of this time tell you about your life and community?

One Wants a Teller in a Time Like This

One wants a teller in a time like this

One's not a man, one's not a woman grown
To bear enormous business all alone.

One cannot walk this winding street with pride
Straight-shouldered, tranquil-eyed,
Knowing one knows for sure the way back home.
One wonders if one has a home.

One is not certain if or why or how.
One wants a Teller now:

Put on your rubbers and you won't catch a cold
Here's hell, there's heaven. Go to Sunday School

Be patient, time brings all good things-(and cool
Stong balm to calm the burning at the brain?)
Behold,
Love's true, and triumphs; and God's actual.
~ Gwendolyn Brooks

6. Write about the world speaks everything, or at least something, to you.

Earth Dweller

It was all the clods at once become
precious; it was the barn, and the shed,
and the windmill, my hands, the crack
Arlie made in the axehandle: oh, let me stay here
humbly, forgotten, to rejoice in it all;
let the sun casually rise and set.
If I have not found the right place,
teach me, for somewhere inside, the clods are
vaulted mansions, lines through the barn sing
for the saints forever, the shed and the windmill
read so glorious the sun shudders like a gong.

Now I know why people worship, carry around
magic emblems, wake up talking dreams
they teach to their children: the world speaks.
The world speaks everything to us.
It is our only friend.
~ William Stafford

7. Tell us a story of deep delight.

Tell Me a Story

Long ago, in Kentucky, I, a boy, stood
By a dirt road, in first dark, and heard
The great geese hoot northward.

I could not see them, there being no moon
And the stars sparse. I heard them.

I did not know what was happening in my heart.

It was the season before the elderberry blooms,
Therefore they were going north.

The sound was passing northward.

Tell me a story.

In this century, and moment, of mania,
Tell me a story.

Make it a story of great distances, and starlight.

The name of the story will be Time,
But you must not pronounce its name.

Tell me a story of deep delight.
~ Robert Penn Warren

8. Taking a line like “It will take little time” or “it will take all your heart,” write.

Final Notations

It will not be simple, it will not take long
It will take little time, it will take all your thought
It will take all your heart, it will take all your breath
It will be short, it will not be simple
It will touch through your ribs, it will take all your heart
It will not take long, it will occupy all your thought
As a city is occupied, as a bed is occupied
It will take your flesh, it will not be simple
You are coming into us who cannot withstand you
You are coming into us who never wanted to withstand you
You are taking parts of us into places never planned
You are going far away with pieces of our lives
It will be short, it will take all your breath
It will not be simple, it will become your will
~ Adrienne Rich

9. Write about this year to you – the year behind or the year ahead (or both).

The Year

What can be said in New Year rhymes,
That's not been said a thousand times?

The new years come, the old years go,
We know we dream, we dream we know.

We rise up laughing with the light,

We lie down weeping with the night.

We hug the world until it stings,
We curse it then and sigh for wings.

We live, we love, we woo, we wed,
We wreath our brides, we sheet our dead.

We laugh, we weep, we hope, we fear,
And that's the burden of the year.

~ Ella Wheeler Wilcox

10. Describe something/someone that either you witness, or that witnesses you. How do you “reconfirm/ that witnessing presence”?

Witness

Sometimes the mountain
is hidden from me in veils
of cloud, sometimes
I am hidden from the mountain
in veils of inattention, apathy, fatigue,
when I forget or refuse to go
down to the shore or a few yards
up the road, on a clear day,
to reconfirm
that witnessing presence.

~ Denise Levertov

11. Write your own piece speaking directly to mercy or another quality you want in your life.

Rock Me, Mercy

The river stones are listening
because we have something to say.
The trees lean closer today.
The singing in the electrical woods
has gone dumb. It looks like rain
because it is too warm to snow.
Guardian angels, wherever you're hiding,
we know you can't be everywhere at once.
Have you corralled all the pretty wild
horses? The memory of ants asleep
in daylilies, roses, holly, & larkspur.
The magpies gaze at us, still
waiting. River stones are listening.

But all we can say now is,
Mercy, please, rock me.
~ Yusef Komunakyya

12. Write about the sky inside you – what does it look like, what weather is there now and on the horizon, how does its temperature and air feel to you?

One Heart

Look at the birds. Even flying
is born

out of nothing. The first sky
is inside you, open

at either end of day.
The work of wings

was always freedom, fastening
one heart to every falling thing.
~ Li-Young Lee

13. Write of what you're ready to release from the old year and what you're ready to invite into your life now.

Burning the Old Year

Letters swallow themselves in seconds.
Notes friends tied to the doorknob,
transparent scarlet paper,
sizzle like moth wings,
marry the air.

So much of any year is flammable,
lists of vegetables, partial poems.
Orange swirling flame of days,
so little is a stone.

Where there was something and suddenly isn't,
an absence shouts, celebrates, leaves a space.
I begin again with the smallest numbers.

Quick dance, shuffle of losses and leaves,
only the things I didn't do
crackle after the blazing dies.

14. This poem is about the thread of music (intentional, such as songs, and unintentional, such as rhythmic sounds). Write a list poem or prose piece about the thread of music or anything else important to you, starting with where it started and how it moved through your life.

The Thread

My mother singing “Tora Lora Lora,”
an Irish lullaby although we were Brooklyn Jews.
The vacuum's roar muffled by shag carpeting
while the birch banged on the hapless window sill.
The humming refrigerator in the middle of the night
when everyone slept or paced alone in the old house.
The chants encasing me in each swaying note
as I wrapped my thin arms around my cold chest
in the cavernous synagogue. The creak of the swing
as I turned horizontal, defying gravity in the static
of the transistor radio. The old staccato of my father's anger.
The loud slap on the bass notes of the bare torso
making new bruises, then the slow breath pacing in
until the danger was gone. All the possibilities in each
novel about a girl born afraid but about to enter the calm pond
of my life and swim. Bike tires on wet pavement at dawn.
The first kiss in the back of the school bus broken by applause.
How rain parts its pouring for thunder's interior roar.
The mornings revved up like motorcycles, the exhaling speed
of rivers, starving for new ground or betrayed by rocks
toward the remembering willows, singing reed by reed.
The happy rhythm of the subway rocking my spine
in and out of alignment with the dark, tunneling through water,
all the buzzing bodies ferrying millions of cells into sound,
the miracle of one rushing animal carrying us all.

Please see our blog at <http://mytre recalledlife.wordpress.com>.

You can contribute to the blog (with your own name, a made-up name, or anonymously)
by writing to Sherri at sherrisbeads@gmail.com

You can see Caryn's latest news and blogs, plus some writing tips and other sources
at <http://carynmirriamgoldberg.com>