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To Make a Prairie: Founding Transformative Language Arts

*To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee.
And revery.
The revery alone will do,
If bees are few
~ Emily Dickinson (710)*

To Make a Prairie

It's no coincidence that I live in the middle of a big field, and have been helping a new academic field emerge since 2000. The grassy field we live in is slowly transitioning from a brome hay field into a prairie by conscious intent, awareness and surprises inherent in its potential, and I very much feel that TLA as an emerging field is following many of the same dynamics. Just as the soils, climate and suppressed native plants were all there and flourished when given the opportunity provided by a change in managing the field, all of the elements of TLA as a field were already present, ready to take advantage of the opportunity provided by the decision to develop the concept of Transformative Language Arts. As one of our TLA alumni Patricia Fontaine once told me, I turned out to be the right vessel at the right time. I simply did what I felt like I had to do without always understanding it, driven by instinct, and guided by lessons learned in discussion, discernment, and trial and error with Goddard College students, staff and faculty, and people practicing TLA in the community.

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

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

Roots of TLA in My Life

It started with a writing workshop. Propelled by my experience of writing saving my life as a teen, and bolstered by filling journals and writing manuscripts since that time, I decided to offer a community workshop on writing and healing. I was 32, in the middle of graduate school in English, and had recently given birth to my second child. My future, as I had planned out in great detail at the time, included finishing my doctorate, hanging out with my kids, and making enough of a living through my day job adjunct-teaching at the University of Kansas, plus some other work (such as community writing workshops) to have time for my own writing.

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

and talked at length about ways to interpret the meaning of our experiences.

Led by the people who came to my workshops, I started developing ways to facilitate such sessions. While I had been writing and reading most of life, I was far more prepared for this work from my years as a community organizer. For most of my life up until I developed TLA, I felt pulled into two directions: writing and organizing. I had always felt the call of our broken world, enough that I immersed myself in social change groups from my teens onward, eventually landing in the bioregional movement, where I found a way of understanding the world based in place and community.

Bioregionalism points us to learn from where we live how to live, and the movement, which emerged in the 1970s and 80s, and according to the Kansas Area Watershed Council's website, "...acts as a catalyst for social and political change, focusing on decentralization, strengthening local economies and culture, and preserving and enriching the natural systems of water, air and land in ways that foster sustainability." The gatherings I've attended and helped organize since 1982 with my local bioregional group, the Kansas Area Watershed Council, and the Continental Bioregional Congress, are based on the premise that together we create a ceremonial village, a model of how to live in community and eco-community. To help us live together with peace and justice, we've adopted and adapted Quaker traditions of consensus-based meetings and communal discernment. During 30-plus years in the movement, I've experienced many intensive lessons in how communities can draw on a strong group process to navigate gender, race, religious and spiritual, disability, class and other divides, and most of all, how we can learn to listen deeply to each other and to the living earth.

Prior to starting graduate school, I also learned about how organizations function through five years of work as a community organizer with labor unions, environmental organizations, and social service agencies in Kansas City, MO and Lawrence, KS. I worked with various non-profit organizations, first with labor unions on energy and conservation issues, and later as coordinator for a coalition of 60 social service and community groups.¹ All of my hands-on education -- whether through organizing campaigns, brainstorming tactics to move ahead social issues, or sustaining strong and inclusive grassroots organizations -- speaks to the importance of including and listening to many voices.

Most of what I learned during those years came from Thea Nietfeld, a community organizer in Kansas City who I worked with at the Citizen/Labor Energy Coalition, taught me by example about listening closely to people, whether they were supporting or opposing our group. Caroline Estes, one of the foremost teachers of the Quaker traditions of consensus, and later, Bea Briggs, founder of the International Foundation for Facilitation and Change, facilitated meetings at bioregional congresses for 200-300 people with grace and an inclusive spirit, reminding us that we all hold a piece of our overall wisdom.

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

Within three years of my first workshop, my plan to teach part-time indefinitely morphed into a

better opportunity than I could have anticipated: a full-time teaching job as a professor at Haskell Indians Nations University, the only inter-tribal university, located in Lawrence. I found a lovely Japanese woman to watch my newborn son during the day while I worked full-time (Haskell required professors to be on campus 40 hours/week), did an occasional writing workshop, and dreamt of my own poetry when I didn't have time to write. I pumped breast milk in my office between classes, graded papers while the baby slept on me, and committed to what my life would now be for the next 30 or so years.

Six months later, my Haskell job dissolved beneath my feet, sending me into a tailspin. For two weeks, I hardly slept, and wondered what I would do now, having given up my adjunct position at K.U. Then a friend called me with some news: Goddard College, where she taught, was hiring faculty for its BA and MA individualized program. Teaching at Goddard would mean going to Vermont twice a year for 10 days of faculty meetings and a residency, but it would also mean working with students deeply on interdisciplinary, self-designed studies. Since 1996, I've been flying twice a year to teach at Goddard, where students design their own curriculum, choose their own faculty mentor to work with one-on-one for a semester's worth of credit, and focus their studies on growing their scholarship, whole selves, and contribution to their communities.

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

At the same time, I realized that even in Kansas, not known for being the most progressive state on the block when it comes to funding arts-based programs, I could make a living simply by leading writing workshops. Granted, it would be a feast-or-famine living, but I found increasing veins of funding, whether from private workshops, grants for drug and alcohol prevention re-routed to fund writing workshops, or state grants for a writing series that brought together retired women with at-risk teenage girls to write in a small Kansas town.

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

Since that time, over 70 people have earned master's degrees at Goddard specializing in TLA, and as we've needed to articulate more what TLA is, where its roots wind down into and how its branches expand up and out, it's become necessary to name and support this field of study. That necessity had led to the first TLA reader, *The Power of Words*, which Janet Tallman and I co-edited; the development of the TLA Network, a non-profit organization focused on all things TLA; an annual conference, *The Power of Words*, started at Goddard in 2003 and now organized by the TLA Network;

and many manner of growing TLA in the world.

While TLA, at 14 years old, is becoming better known and understood, it's still a tricky term to define, much like explaining bioregionalism. Both name an ancient impulse with contemporary urgencies, in ways not unlike the prairie emerging from the brome field, starting gradually and becoming more self evident with each passing year. Bioregionalism points us toward more traditional ways of interacting with our land and local seasonal cycles so that we can develop new cultures, economies, and communities in balance with the earth where we live. TLA tips its hat to the roots of the oral tradition while setting out for new ground: an interdisciplinary convergence of artful words, personal growth and social change.

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

The Wild Diversity and Depth of One Field

When Ezra Nepon Berkleyⁱⁱⁱ -- a writer, grassroots fundraiser, organizer and performer -- started her MA in TLA at Goddard College, she thought she might develop a workshop curriculum, write a collection of stories, or create a performance. Following the line of what she loved, she realized how much her Philadelphia community of Yiddish-revival and Queer activists and artists was often absent from history and largely invisible beyond itself.

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

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

Ezra's work also models how to use transformative language arts to document transformative language arts. Ezra's creative and spirited thesis employs interdisciplinary methodologies, including oral histories, archival research, deep examination of scholarship, social histories, biographies, all to create a liberating and inclusive way of doing research that challenges the status quo of responding

only to books, articles and interviews. In other words, the very way in which Ezra conducted this study demonstrates what an interdisciplinary methodology for TLA can look like.

Ezra is one of many pioneers in the emerging field of TLA as well as others, such as Jeanne Hewell Chambers, who did a study on the ethical issues involved in telling someone's story; Alexandra Hartman, who explored filmmaking as a form of TLA to reclaim what it means to be a body; and Deb Hensley, who explored how music, sound and words can enlarge our capacity for ecological justice. All of these studies arise out of the intersection of various fields (academic disciplines of fields, such as ones visible as college departments) and traditions (either from within or outside of academic disciplines, such as memoir writing or Quaker traditions of group process). TLA is intrinsically interdisciplinary, drawing from literature and creative writing, mythology and the oral tradition, psychology, health and healing, social change and social welfare, drama and other arts.

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

Yet when something is officially deemed a field is open to interpretation. While researching this question, I came across debates on whether Communications, Theology and Public Works were legitimate academic fields. It's a little like defining what belongs in the canon of American literature: to one scholar, the canon holds mainly the work of dead white men; to another, the canon contains representative works from a wide spectrum of writers diverse in color, religion, gender, ethnicity and other distinctions. Disciplines are also mutable and subject to shifts in culture, and are, according to Armin Krishan, “...themselves fragmented and heterogeneous, and which interact with other disciplines in many complex ways (5).

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

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

This is a far cry from disciplinary studies which often mirror my experience in earning my MA in Creative Writing: I was literally told to read ten texts from list A and ten from list B to achieve a sense of mastery, a process more akin to ordering take-out Chinese food. In interdisciplinary study, the

simple distinction that comes from students choosing texts and then naming for themselves what they're learning is a quantum leap away from how most colleges are set up as a collection of departments and programs. A study in TLA on collaborative performance and interfaith theater to address a polarized community would draw from the fields of Religious Studies, Drama, Social Work and Education, and traditions, such as the interfaith dialogue movement, bringing together academically odd bedfellows for the sake of finding innovative solutions to a current social issue.

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

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

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

Soft Boundaries and the Fire of Discernment

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

While I live in the kingdom of tallgrass prairie, native grasses that grow six-to-eight feet high across rolling hills, reddening in winter and fading to pale tan in high summer, I also live in an eco-region with emerging woodlands, moving in from the east. The soft boundaries between prairie and woodlands make for a dynamic play of forest and field, particularly generative for wildlife that thrives on the edges of regions. Yet too many trees can overwhelm and especially starve out a prairie, so aside from mowing down starter-trees, which isn't all that effective, the main and best way to maintain and even bring back native prairie is with fire.

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

The field of TLA shares soft boundaries with many related fields such as Journal Therapy,

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

What is distinct about TLA is its reach, bringing together realms not usually sharing the same space. TLA focuses on the river that runs through all forms of the spoken, written and sung word for a purpose beyond entertainment or expression, bridging the gap between personal growth and health, and societal change. For example, mental health counseling often focuses on an individual changing his/her habitual responses, outside of the cultural contexts of the individual's issues (such as environmental degradation related to a person feeling depressed). A storytelling workshop for people living with depression, however, might focus on telling stories that encompass the layers of our lives: the personal, communal, cultural and global.^v

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

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

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

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

- Personal and social transformation is at the heart of becoming a lifelong learner committed to the welfare of your community and the planet.
- Creativity and transformation as an individual and communal process embraces both a collaborative approach and you individually mapping out your own learning practice, one that includes using your own voice to create your own definitions and applications.
- Defining all the defining terms as part of TLA's philosophy comes from the understanding that

true transformation only comes when the ones transformed can claim and name their own experience.

- Honoring both the spoken and written word is especially relevant to progressive education's ideal that individuals must take charge of their learning and expression.
- Interdisciplinary theory and practice is an illustration of how TLA, like all programs at Goddard, looks beyond standardized disciplines that often compartmentalize knowledge to more integrated and relevant ways of knowing. Such a focus helps you see the big picture behind the work you wish to do in your community and in your own artistic practice.
- Greater perspective on your place in the world clearly relates to Goddard's emphasis on welfare for others and the Earth.
- The very nature of TLA calls for a non-elitist, non-competitive and non-dogmatic atmosphere where deep and respectful listening to one another and listening to ourselves, as well as passionate and thoughtful questioning are central.
- The TLA work you do in your communities extends Goddard's mission to build and sustain a community of learners beyond the college itself. (*Addendum 7-8*)

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

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

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

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

Study, activism and personal artistic practice all influence how we define TLA as well as how we do TLA. When I facilitated the housing authority workshops for women of color, I came to the table with years of experience writing through hard times, and could more readily understand ways to point writing prompts to help participants cultivate meaning and hope. From having studied history and class issues, I had some sense of how economic divides, and perceptions of what we're entitled to do with

our lives based on class issues. Of course, I learned far more from the housing authority residents than I had ever learned through reading women's studies books on history and class issues, and I learned more about the capacity of our writing to give us strength than I had previously known on my own. Yet that process of being led by what's been given to me speaks to the points of the TLA philosophy at Goddard.

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

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

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

Revery Will Do

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

I arrive at Turning Point: The Center for Hope and Healing, located on the Kansas side, with my arms full. Some of the workshop participants, already there, help me carry in bags of fresh fruit and vegetables, hummus and corn chips. Once in the door, I put down some of the food and hug Cathy Pendleton, the director of Adult Programming at this exceptional non-profit organization, which provides people of all ages living with serious illness support groups and workshops. Cathy hands me copies of my handout and a list of participants -- 25 people confirmed, plus a waiting list -- all of whom either live with cancer, M.S. Parkinson's disease, or other illnesses, or are caregivers for people living with illness. For a decade, I've been leading Sunday afternoon writing retreats here once every month or two, and like most workshop days, today I see many of the regulars plus some new people, who walk in tentatively, clutching a notebook or asking if this is the right place.

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

John Willison, who began coming to the writing workshops I facilitating here about three year ago, when his cancer was remission, now updates us on how his parotid cancer has metastasized to three of his vertebrae, a slow-moving cancer, but a moving cancer nonetheless. When I suggest writing in response to a Linda Pastan poem called "Threshold," a poem that speaks to what we're crossing over or through at this moment in our lives, John writes this poem:

I have my home in two worlds

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

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

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

I bashfully flirt with every beauty.

The blushing maple, there
That brushstroke of moon.
Her hand on my chest,
Light as air,
And just as needed.

It's all an enchantment.

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

Not a house of sorrows.

Yes, everything will tremble.

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

Where this greeting awaits:

Hello, darling. Welcome home.
~ John Willison

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

“To make a prairie,” Emily Dickinson writes, take clover and a bee - something already growing there and someone to pollinate it to spread the clover. But it also takes reverie, the art of living fully however life comes, and as Dickinson concludes, “The reverie alone will do/ If bees are few.”

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Asili, Taina: <http://tainaasili.com>
Becker, Joseph: <http://www.umfk.edu/directory/bio.cfm?bio=8>
Cross, Jen: <http://writingourselveswhole.org>
Dubin, Minna: <http://www.sfartscommission.org/WC/about-writerscorps/staff>
Fontaine, Patricia: <http://patriciafontaine.com>
Gender, Ruth: <http://ruthgendler.com>
Henderson, Carol: <http://carolhenderson.com>
Hensley, Deb: <http://whendidwestopsinging.com>
Keefe-Perry, Callid: <http://callidkeefeperry.com>
Keppel, Kirsten: <http://shootsfromyourroots.com>
Leatherwood, Vanita: <http://livingwellworkshop.com>
Lipman, Doug: <http://storydynamics.com>
Morgan, Nancy: <http://lombardi.georgetown.edu/artsandhumanities>
Nepon, Ezra Berkley: <http://ezraberkeleynepon.wordpress.com>
Severson, Heather: <http://writeitoutjournal.com>
VanMeenen, Karen: <http://www.rit.edu/cla/english/karen-vanmeenen>
Youmans, Scott: <http://thisenergeticman.com>
Young, Joanna Tebbs: <http://wisdomwithinink.com>

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Ph.D., CPT is the Kansas Poet Laureate 2009-2013, and the author or editor of 16 books, including four collections of poetry; *The Sky Begins At Your Feet: A Memoir on Cancer, Community and Coming Home to the Body*; the novel *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

i I trained at the Midwest Academy, “a national training institute committed to advancing the struggle for social, economic, and racial justice.”

ii Faculty members vital to the planning retreat for TLA were Shelley Vermilya, Sara Norton, James Sparrell, Frances Charet and Margo MacLeod. A prospective TLA student, Danielle LaFleur Brooks, also attended the retreat, and later earned her MA in TLA.

iii Ezra Berkley Nepon prefers the pronoun “they” or to simply be referred to as “Ezra.”

iv The word “master” is loaded with patriarchal baggage, and yet we haven’t yet, in the Individualized MA program at Goddard, found a better word to explain mastery. Competency doesn’t convey “mastering” something. If anyone reading this has a better word for mastery than mastery, please contact me at carynmirriamgoldberg@gmail.com.

v People doing TLA in their communities might call themselves TLA workers, organizers, activists or artists, but, unless otherwise licensed, should never refer to themselves or represent themselves as therapists, counselors or social workers.