

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Workshop Handouts

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection

March 2023

Kansas Leadership Center Interfaith Writing Workshop

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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

Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "Kansas Leadership Center Interfaith Writing Workshop" (2023). *Workshop Handouts*. 7.

https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_handouts/7

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.

Kansas Leadership Center

Interfaith Writing Workshop

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. Along with this, reading your writing aloud is always optional, and no self-deprecating remarks allowed (especially when preparing to read your work).
8. 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.
9. Witness others. Listen carefully with your full attention. It will enhance your ability to listen to your own words.
10. 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.
11. 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.
12. The goal of interfaith encounter is increased understanding of the other and appreciation of differences in order to engage common concerns.
13. Express your faith from within your tradition, not by comparisons.
14. Listen for a broad range of difference; listen without assumptions or comparisons. Notice differences beyond your expectations/outside your personal faith frame, including a different vocabulary.
15. Allow deep listening to possibly change your opinion or views. Allow yourself to pass into another's religious experience, even if just for a moment.

Writing Prompts

1. Write about where you're from, landing on as many tangibles as you can about your childhood religious or spiritual experience, however you have come to understand it. The example below by George Ella Lyon, from her book by the same title, gives you some great ideas. You can also begin each line you write with "I am from...." Telescope in toward your example to childhood sensory experiences.

Where I'm From

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush,
the Dutch elm
whose long gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from perk up and pipe down.
I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments –
snapped before I budded –
leaf-fall from the family tree.

2. After reading James Wright's "A Blessing," write about a moment in your life when you felt like you could break into blossom.....or write about a blessing you find given to you from the earth.

A Blessing

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
and nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

~ James Wright

3. The following traditional Navajo prayer speaks to the restorative powers of beautiful. After reading this, reflect upon a place of great beauty for you. Then write a poem/prayer that honors that beauty and how that beauty may help protect, watch over and restore your heart. Feel free to use repetition to invoke the sense of the place.

Dark young pine, at the center of the earth originating,
I have made your sacrifice.
Whiteshell, turquoise, abalone beautiful,
Jet beautiful, fool's gold beautiful, blue pollen beautiful,
reed pollen, pollen beautiful, your sacrifice I have made.
This day your child I have become, I say.

Watch over me.
Hold your hand before me in protection.
Stand guard for me, speak in defense of me.
As I speak for you, speak for me.
As you speak for me, so will I speak for you.
May it be beautiful before me,

May it be beautiful behind me,
May it be beautiful below me,
May it be beautiful above me,
May it be beautiful all around me.

I am restored in beauty.
I am restored in beauty.
I am restored in beauty.
I am restored in beauty

~ traditional Navajo prayer, recorded by Gladys A. Reichard

4. Kadya Molodowsky, 1894-1975, originally wrote this prose prayer in Yiddish. She lived the first half of her life in Poland, the second half in New York. After reading this poem, write your own prayer asking for what you want and need to cultivate most in your life.

Prayers: I

Don't let me fall
As a stone falls upon the hard ground.
And don't let my hands become dry
As the twigs of a tree
When the wind beats down the last leaves.
And when the storm raises dust from the earth
With anger and howling,
Don't let me become the last fly
Trembling terrified on a windowpane.
Don't let me fall.
I have asked for so much,
But as a blade of your grass in a distant wild field
Let's drop a seed in the lap of the earth
And dies away,
Sow in me your living breath,
As you sow a seed in the earth.
~ Kadya Molodowsky

5. What does "Forget your life" mean to you in the context of this poem? Or, if you resonate with the word "God," how do you see yourself (and others) opening themselves up to "God's love" to help people we don't even know?

Forget your life. Say *God is Great*. Get up.
You think you know what time it is. It's time to pray.
You've carved so many little figurines, too many.
Don't knock on any random door like a begger.
Reach your long hand out to another door, beyond where
you go on the street, the street
where everyone says, "How are you?"
and no one says, "*How aren't you?*"

Tomorrow you'll see what you've broken and torn tonight,
thrashing in the dark. Inside you
there's an artist you don't know about.
He's not interested in how things look different in moonlight.

If you are here unfaithfully with us,
you're causing terrible damage.
If you've opened your loving to God's love,
you're helping people you don't know
and have never seen.

Is what I say true? Say *yes* quickly,
if you know it, if you've known it
from the beginning of the universe.
~ Rumi

6. Write about a moment what it looks like when God or whatever word names the life force to you says "yes" to you.

God Says Yes To Me

I asked God is it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes.
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is.
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
and is it even okay if I don't paragraph my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes
~ Kaylin Haught

7. 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

8. What is it that's been given to you to trust? Or how can you let yourself be led by what was given to you?

Gift

I have to trust what was given to me
if I am to trust anything
it led the stars over the shadowless mountain
what does it not remember in its night and silence
what does it not hope knowing itself no child of time

what did it not begin what will it not end
I have to hold I up in my hands as my ribs hold up my heart
I have to let it open its wings and fly among the gifts of the unknown
again in the mountain I have to turn
to the morning

I must be led by what was given to me
as streams are led by it
and braiding flights of birds
the gropings of veins the learning of plants
the thankful days
breath by breath

I call to it Nameless One O Invisible
Untouchable Free
I am nameless I am divided
I am invisible I am untouchable
and empty
nomad live with me
be my eyes
my tongue and my hands
my sleep and my rising
out of chaos
come and be given

~ W.S. Merwin

9. Write what it is now the time to do in terms of your own faith journey.

Now is the Time

Now is the time to know
That all that you do is sacred.

Now, why not consider
A lasting truce with yourself and God.

Now is the time to understand
That all your ideas of right and wrong
Were just a child's training wheels
To be laid aside
When you finally live
With veracity
And love.

Hafiz is a divine envoy
Whom the Beloved
Has written a holy message upon.

My dear, please tell me,
Why do you still
Throw sticks at your heart
And God?

What is it in that sweet voice inside
That incites you to fear?

Now is the time for the world to know
That every thought and action is sacred.

This is the time for you to compute the impossibility
That there is anything
But Grace.

Now is the season to know
That everything you do
Is sacred.

~ Hafiz, From *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz the Great Sufi Master*, translations by Daniel

Ladinsky

10. Make your own list of praises.

A List of Praises

Give praise with psalms that tell the trees to sing,

Give praise with Gospel choirs in storefront churches,
Mad with the joy of the Sabbath,
Give praise with the babble of infants, who wake with the sun,
Give praise with children chanting their skip-rope rhymes,
A poetry not in books, a vagrant mischievous poetry
living wild on the Streets through generations of children.

Give praise with the sound of the milk-train far away
With its mutter of wheels and long-drawn-out sweet whistle
As it speeds through the fields of sleep at three in the morning,
Give praise with the immense and peaceful sigh
Of the wind in the pinewoods,
At night give praise with starry silences.

Give praise with the skirling of seagulls
And the rattle and flap of sails
And gongs of buoys rocked by the sea-swell
Out in the shipping-lanes beyond the harbor.
Give praise with the humpback whales,
Huge in the ocean they sing to one another.

Give praise with the rasp and sizzle of crickets, katydids and cicadas,
Give praise with hum of bees,
Give praise with the little peepers who live near water.
When they fill the marsh with a shimmer of bell-like cries
We know that the winter is over.

Give praise with mockingbirds, day's nightingales.
Hour by hour they sing in the crepe myrtle
And glossy tulip trees
On quiet side streets in southern towns.

Give praise with the rippling speech
Of the eider-duck and her ducklings
As they paddle their way downstream
In the red-gold morning
On Restiguche, their cold river,
Salmon river,
Wilderness river.

Give praise with the whitethroat sparrow.
Far, far from the cities,
Far even from the towns,
With piercing innocence
He sings in the spruce-tree tops,
Always four notes
And four notes only.

Give praise with water,
With storms of rain and thunder
And the small rains that sparkle as they dry,
And the faint floating ocean roar
That fills the seaside villages,
And the clear brooks that travel down the mountains

And with this poem, a leaf on the vast flood,
And with the angels in that other country.

~ Anne Porter

11. What threshold do you need to cross to truly listen to others who dwell in very different faith traditions and practices?

Threshold

There is a hesitation
between seasons

when the last live leaf, for instance,
waits to shrivel

or when spring gathers its green forces
beyond bare branches.

There is no odor
of smoke or lilac;

the sky is no particular color.
But in those brief pauses

we mourn the past
even as we sense the future.

Shy as a girl on the blooded threshold
of being a woman,

we wait, holding our breath,
until the earth stirs

and shakes itself
and the next thing happens.

~ Linda Pastan

12. After reading Peshah Gertler's poem, write of something hard you've been through – some old wound or misdirection – that you now can see something holy in.

The Healing Time

Finally on my way to yes
I bump into
all the places
where I said no
to my life
all the untended wounds
the red and purple scars
those hieroglyphs of pain
carved into my skin, my bones,
those coded messages
that send me down
the wrong street
again and again
where I find them
the old wounds
the old misdirections
and I lift them
one by one
close to my heart
and I say holy
holy.
~ Peshia Gertler

13. After reading David Whyte's poem, write your own piece about faith – how hard it is to find or hold onto, or how and how much it serves you.

Faith

I want to write about faith
about the way the moon rises
over cold snow, night after night.

Faithful even as it fades from fullness,
slowly becoming that last curving and impossible
sliver of light before the final darkness.

But I have no faith myself
I refuse it the smallest entry.

Let this then, my small poem,
like a new moon, slender and barely open,
be the first prayer that opens me to faith.

~ David Whyte

14. Write about how you might understand “the words under the words,” especially of someone else's

words.

The Words Under the Words

for Sitti Khadra, north of Jerusalem

My grandmother's hands recognize grapes,
the damp shine of a goat's new skin.
When I was sick they followed me,
I woke from the long fever to find them
covering my head like cool prayers.

My grandmother's days are made of bread,
a round pat-pat and the slow baking.
She waits by the oven watching a strange car
circle the streets. Maybe it holds her son,
lost to America. More often, tourists,
who kneel and weep at mysterious shrines.
She knows how often mail arrives,
how rarely there is a letter.
When one comes, she announces it, a miracle,
listening to it read again and again
in the dim evening light.

My grandmother's voice says nothing can surprise her.
Take her the shotgun wound and the crippled baby.
She knows the spaces we travel through,
the messages we cannot send—our voices are short
and would get lost on the journey.
Farewell to the husband's coat,
the ones she has loved and nourished,
who fly from her like seeds into a deep sky.
They will plant themselves. We will all die.

My grandmother's eyes say Allah is everywhere, even in death.
When she talks of the orchard and the new olive press,
when she tells the stories of Joha and his foolish wisdoms,
He is her first thought, what she really thinks of is His name.
“Answer, if you hear the words under the words—
otherwise it is just a world with a lot of rough edges,
difficult to get through, and our pockets full of stones.”

~ Naomi Shihab Nye

15. Write your own “To be blessed....” by various people, plants, animals, etc.

The Blessing of the Old Woman, the Tulip, and the Dog

To be blessed
said the old woman
is to live and work
so hard
God's love
washes right through you
like milk through a cow

To be blessed
said the dark red tulip
is to knock their eyes out
with the slug of lust
implied by
your up-ended skirt

To be blessed
said the dog
is to have a pinch
of God
inside you
and all the other
dogs can smell it

~ Alicia Suskin Ostriker

16. Using the structure of this poem as a guide, write about where you find your north star for your faith journey.

Poem Without End

Inside the brand-new museum
there's an old synagogue.
Inside the synagogue
is me.
Inside me
my heart.
Inside my heart
a museum.
Inside the museum
a synagogue,
inside it
me,
inside me
my heart,
inside my heart
a museum

~ Yehuda Amichai, translated by Chana Bloch