

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Performances & Keynotes

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg Collection

March 2023

HopeWorks Talk

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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

Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "HopeWorks Talk" (2023). *Performances & Keynotes*. 8.
https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_performances/8

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 Performances & Keynotes by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lftompson@pittstate.edu.

HopeWorks Talk

Thank you so much, Vanita, and everyone at HopeWorks. This is a marvelous surprise and gift, and I'm deeply moved.

I founded Transformative Language Arts because I know in my bones how much creativity, community, and good witnesses can save us when we're living in or recovering from abuse and trauma. I come by this knowing honestly.

I grew up with an abusive father, a family that exploded apart, and years of estrangement from most family members, leaving me with that sense that I didn't belong anywhere. I craved community and connection, but the first place where I found a home was on the page. Writing was a wormhole to my sources: my sense of the holy and the living earth, the wind and the trees, and that shiver in me that said this was where I belonged. It gave me hope, possibilities, and purpose.

Yet writing in isolation isn't enough, and it wouldn't have been enough to save my life when I was being slapped, kicked, or screamed at everyday. Thank heavens I found two good witnesses – a young English teacher named Judith Rance-Roney (I'm still in touch with), who, although just a little older than me at the time, created a poetry club for what she called the lost girls. My other lifesaver was Phil Brater, a large balding man with a high-pitched voice that made him sound like he was screeching when he laughed and a wicked sense of humor – he was my synagogue youth group advisor and constantly assured me, after listening to my latest poem, that I wasn't crazy or bad, horrible things were indeed happening, and this would likely be the worst time in my life. He was right.

Creating something in the midst of being hurt, insulted, and demeaned, and finding good witnesses and a sense of community showed me how I could belong, even and especially to my own self. Making art from pain and powerlessness, even if feels like making something out of nothing, is our birthright. Just putting word after word on the page brings us to our senses, connecting us with our

ability to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel the world around us, which, in turn, gives us the gift of the present moment. When we create, we are fully alive and claiming our power to transform our narratives and take back our voice and agency.

Writing in community – with people who really “get us” – shows us we’re not alone. There’s nothing like real people in real time nodding and looking into our eyes when we speak our words, our truths, our deepest questions aloud.

All of this widens our perspective so that we can glimpse actual options beyond what might feel like being locked away from joy and love. I remember sitting against the white-painted cinderblock walls of my synagogue with Phil as he encouraged me to keep following the path of poetry to a wider view. Such paths teach us to trust ourselves a little more even if we can’t trust what’s happening in our homes, schools, communities, world, and especially when we’re walking in the dark.

Good witnesses help us feel the full weight of our words, which in turn, can transform our responses trained by trauma of second-guessing, denying, or marginalizing ourselves and tear down the straw house of gaslighting, abuse, and all the ways we’ve been violated.

Humans are such a mixed bag when it comes to what we’re capable of, but one thing we know in every cell is how we’re also made of resilience, which isn’t just the ability to bounce back, but the possibility to build a new home out of art, healing, curiosity, kindness, listening, and community.

What you do at Hopeworks proves this everyday in all the prevention training for youth, adults, and professionals, and in all the programming to help survivors make community, speak from their true voices, treasure themselves and their self-care, trust their innate leadership capabilities, and embrace sustained healing. I’ve seen the miraculous difference a workshop, a publication like *Cultivate* or *Dragonfly*, a training, a play, a reading, a conversation, a podcast, a place, a program like this can make.

Thank you for inviting me and so many others into your good and life-saving work. I close with this poem I wrote while facilitating a group at Turning Point, a center in Kansas City for people living with serious illness as patients, survivors, or caregivers.

There Is a Door

*At the end of my suffering,
there was a door.*

~ Louise Gluck

Always. Across the once-green expanse
hilling the horizon, invaded by cedars
leaning into each other in the sun

right before the wind returns
to clear us of all this humidity,
the righteous angst of being human,

which is not to say it was easy:
we were trapped there, like hurricanes stationed
in place against their will to dissolve

into oceans. We were afraid often
of it never ending, pain so fluent
in speaking the language of forever.

We were separate from each other
below the surface of so much sadness
that even the dragonflies avoided us

or we were lost in the timbers of hurt,
piercing our temples or aching in our calves,
keeping us awake no matter how hard we kicked.

It didn't, doesn't, matter if we cried out
or tightened the long vertical muscles in our necks
to hold in our curses or screams,
or if we felt nothing but the bank of fog
become an ocean so deep and tilted away
from the light that we thought we lived here.

Somehow—a miracle, a piece of luck,
a strange happening—there was a door,
and then, on the other side,

we found each other.