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March 2023

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Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "Wreckage, Wonder and Ways Through the Impossible" (2023). *Performances & Keynotes*. 10.

https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_performances/10

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Wreckage, Wonder and Ways Through the Impossible

It started with a poem on an autumn afternoon, on the stoop of a garden apartment where my dad's volatile girlfriend lived, in the middle of a year-long court battle my parents engaged in while living in the same house, I wrote a poem, each line a lifeline. I was 14 and needed words more than sound or image, and the words didn't disappoint. In writing about despair, I found an island of solace, a quiet place to tuck myself into a hammock made of image, rocked by the rhythmic wind of language. I returned the next day, then the next. Soon I was the girl carrying around a journal and a purple pen, sitting against the smooth brick wall in between classes or in a dark part of the theater during rehearsals of "Bye, Bye Birdie," writing about the ground beneath me dissolving but something -- maybe writing itself -- catching me before I fell too far.

Since that time, writing has continued to sustain me. It's a mirror that shows me my own mind and heart, a way of knowing what I know and unknowing what no longer serves me, a magic window out to the real and vibrant world, wheeling over us with all its weather, change, dynamics and surprises. Through writing, I found ways to see more clearly both life's wreckage and wonder, to paraphrase Adrienne Rich, as well as, "the slow lift of the moon's belly/ over wreckage, dreck, and waste, wild treefrogs calling in/ another season, light and music still pouring over/ our fissured, cracked terrain."

Who among us hasn't suffered wreckage, dreck and waste, but who hasn't also heard the wondrous call of the next season as light and music blanket the broken parts of us? What seems impossible in the moment is pushed over the top of the its mountain by time, and rolls and unfolds into something amazingly survivable.

Our writing can be our flashlight in the dark woods, showing us where and how to step next. Here are seven ways the light has led me home.

1. The Writer as Child

"Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days" -- Flannery O'Connor

Surviving a childhood also gives us enough to write about all the day long, including, for many, defining traumas. Growing up physically abused, I grappled with writing the body injured and harmed as a way to return to and fully reinhabit my whole self. Here is a poem to and from the child I was and am.

What I Could Tell

I could name all the pieces of violence –
the kick or slap, the friendly punch.
"Say it again," the therapist says.
I remember this later, lying in the bathtub
watching my arms and legs float in water, so normal.
Do you see how contained I am? How calm
a poem, as if I were writing about
tree limbs in winter covered in ice. Delicate.
Connected to the glass trunk, bone to bone.

I startle awake. Someone behind me. Reflexes
not everyone has anymore or ever.
But that was another time, weighted in
the cells of skin. Smoke in the vein of the bone.
Does it matter that the shelf of sky was blue,
that there was heat right where
the fist imprinted itself on my leg?
Did it happen like a shovel edge into roots,
someone watching, hands around my neck
before I could speak, and I'm dying
all over again?

There was a room with no air, a cringing
inward, the iris already broken from its bulb.
There was a bathtub with a girl covered
in bruises, the door locked hopefully.

She was tired, so tired
she couldn't stay awake
to tell me what really happened.

I share this poem also in solidarity with those of you who grew up abused or neglected. In my faculty position at Goddard College, and in the writing workshops I've been leading for 20 years, I've worked with many who need to pass through the corridors of abuse, violence, neglect, degradation and betrayal that split them from themselves. What I found -- saving the child ,by writing about her from the vantage point of an adult, helps make us whole -- is mirrored in many writers around me. Writing the darkness into light helps us remember ourselves -- put ourselves back together.

2. The Writer as Mother

Everyone told me it was impossible to write once I had children, which freaked me out to no end since I'm kind of a lukewarm, sobbing mess without writing. Yet two people shared with me another reality. The late Keith Dennison, a generous professor at Emporia State, told a very pregnant me about finishing stories while babies crawled over him, and Ursula LeGuin wrote a fabulous essay about how having children fed the soul of her writing. I found courage in these examples, and so when my oldest son -- who almost died at birth -- was less than a week old, I scribbled this poem on the back of a water bill while he slept on my lap.

Telling My Son About His Birth

It was like visiting a house
I'd only seen before between sleep and waking.
I waited days to enter,
but once inside, I was afraid of the dark
and couldn't find the walls.
Maybe there was a storm.
I can't remember, only that I hurt and thought
I wouldn't get out.

I made noises.
Then I found you –
the top of your head black with hair.
I pushed and pushed to get out,
and when we did, into the hot room
where your father and the midwife waited,
I realized I was afraid most
because this house was the world,
and it was on fire.

But you need to know
there wasn't really a house at all
or any shelter. There was a place I cannot name.
You could call it fear or love
or god – it would still be the place
of no place.

Here, there is a real house
made of wood and concrete.
We have names for things
and a name for you.
We think we are past the fire,
asleep in this chair,
your belly on mine
as we breathe on each other.

The writer as mother discovered she had crossed over into wild terrain, where paths led to tangles in fallen thorns. With children, we are never past the fire, but instead have front-row seats for the life force with all its beauty and terror. (switch sentences)

My marvelous son turned out to have a mild case of Asperger's Syndrome, an autistic spectrum disorder that made it almost impossible for him to read or understand social cues, plus a wicked case of ADHD, a seizure condition, and later, Crohn's disease. He was so different than what all the child-rearing books I read told me to expect that I actually ripped one such book into shreds when he was a toddler. Childhood, despite our best efforts, was searingly painful for him in pockets of isolation and ridicule. After trying everything, from pharmaceuticals, homeopathic medicine, psychic readings, hard love or constant holding, we realized what most parents realize: there's no magic pill, spell or remedy. There's only loving that stretches us beyond who we think we are. I wrote about his story, with his permission, for an essay published in an anthology and online in *Yes Magazine*. Here is an excerpt from what I wrote about Daniel, who's now 23 and doing beautifully as an Americorps volunteer in Tennessee:

Both the center of my heart and the edge of my universe contain Daniel. He is the one, more than anyone or anything else in my life, who challenges me to improvise, to forget how it should be, to drop my expectations and ideas about what life is, what a child is, what a parent is. He teaches me about the psychic wounds I carry into my parenting, and my only choice is to heal myself.

I make many mistakes with him, moments I wish I could do over. I also do many things right, hold him in the middle of the day on the couch mid-winter for no reason, listen to him carefully.

“Mom, I have to make my own mistakes,” he says wisely, like any child would. But it’s very hard to watch a kid whose days are spent being shunned by peers, analyzed or dismissed or hoped upon by teachers, medicalized by health professionals, isolated by his own choices and the constant reinforcement of others who chose to isolate him. To watch your kid.

Daniel teaches me that all rules are arbitrary, answers are illusory, future visions, incomplete. He teaches me to be more patient, more accepting, more tolerant not just of him but of other kids. I see a nine-year-old hyper boy out in public these days, and I don’t get irritated with him; instead, I feel empathy and wonder how his parents are doing.

Mostly, Daniel teaches me that love is never arbitrary.

That love leads us into mystery where no one can say what comes next, or how, or why.

Writing also teaches us that “all rules are arbitrary, answers are illusory, future visions are incomplete.” As my three children motor to and through those heart-stopping young adult years, I continue to write about being a mother, and learning -- through mothering and writing -- how to stretch my heart.

3. “What Falls Away Is Always. And is Near”

That's what Theodore Roethke writes in his villanelle, “The Waking” (“I wake to sleep and take my waking slow...”). Mary Oliver writes “In Blackwater Woods,” “To live in this world, you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.” Both poems show us that the deeper we love, the deeper we feel loss; the greater our love, the greater our life. Yet nothing is truly lost: the phantom body parts, according to energy healer Ursula Gilkeson, glow in the energetic body. Our dead beloveds travel with and in us, sometimes gently present as if a silk shawl was suddenly draped over our shoulders. Our words on the page give us a record not just of what was lost, and how much it still aches or surprises, but what is always, what is near.

“Oh, no! Not another learning opportunity!” the bumper stick of my life read a decade ago when I was diagnosed with cancer and lost a parent to cancer within the same year. I wrote my way through breast cancer, chemotherapy, multiple major surgeries, and what it means to lose hair and breasts, discover a genetic mutation, and witness many family members living through or dying from cancer.

Sometimes we also need to unfurl the deadness and energy, rage and exhilaration, fear and tenderness, particularly of what was beyond language at the time. Willingly surrendering my favorite body part led me to the poetic power of language, where I could also open the door, even before I was strong enough to talk through it, into the future. This poem -- part of *Reading the Body* -- was written about the moment I returned home from my double mastectomy when I took off, seemingly angry that the house was a mess but actually needing to do something I couldn't yet understand at the moment.

Lilac

The day after they cut my breasts off,

just home from the hospital, not even
napping or talking on the phone yet,
that day, I walked on my own two legs
down the dirt road over the slope
of loose rocks, cradling, as I walked,
the broken body, the large orange handled
clippers, the big wind holding me,
the man I loved behind me getting ready
to start his car to come get me,
that day beginning the healing
from all of it – unslashed
from the expectation of what knife or infusion
comes next

was the day I made my way to my mother-in-law's
old-fashioned dark purple lilac, and reached against
the tightness of gauze and paper tape, against
the odd sensation of parts removed and scars
just making themselves, against my sore arms reaching
toward their old strength

to gather and hold,
to cut and cut and cut
all I could fill my arms with,
all the dark purple alive with death and
birth, loss and blossom, and the white ones too.

My arms filling with the explosion of lilac,
my life filling with wind and weight of branches,
all of it against, upon, my open chest,
all of it ready to be carried
into the next life
that starts right now.

The Sky Begins At Your Feet: A Memoir on Cancer, Community & Coming Home to the Body gave me a place to name what was lost with humor, tenderness, curiosity, and even, at times, without rationalization. Sometimes we need to name the hole in the ground that has no name, the absence that is so much a presence. My body loss was encompassed in the story of another loss: my father's pancreatic cancer, diagnosed four months before he died. Here is an excerpt from *The Sky Begins At Your Feet*:

“Do You Recognize Me?”

Hurricanes were ripping decks off beach front homes on the TV in my dad's dimly-lit living room where a bunch of us – my son, my step-sister, Wendy, my dad, and me – were engrossed in watching “America's Deadliest Storms.” We had just spent an hour sitting on the back deck, my father reaching for my stepmother every time she walked past so he could kiss her, and occasionally saying things like, “This is my last fall,” which made Wendy roll her eyes as if he'd told a dirty joke.

Now we were inside, storm-bound, the dinner dishes all washed and just a little time before Ken and I and the kids were to head to Baltimore. A commercial about teeth brightening came on, and everyone but my dad and I slipped off to the kitchen for butter pecan ice cream. The living room was dark, just one lamp on, and I could hear the wind outside, rattling a window behind my head. Rain was coming, probably the rain I had just experienced in Kansas.

My father turned toward me. He had grown thinner, shaved his beard, and his eyes seemed to pop out more than ever behind his thick glasses. He wore a bathrobe, dark and checkered, with his feet bare.

“Do you recognize me?” he asked.

I leaned back in the square floral chair and thought for a moment. “Yeah, I recognize you. I mean, you’ve lost some weight, but I still recognize you.”

His eyes lit up, dark and suddenly burning intensely. “No,” he said, “I don’t mean the physical. Do you recognize me?” He started to say something about his personality having changed, but I realized very quickly he wasn’t talking about personality at all, but something underneath it. He was talking about his soul.

I looked at him, and felt like I was seeing who he was for the first time in a long time, or maybe actually the first time ever. I exhaled and looked very intently into his eyes. “Yeah, I recognize you.”

I feel closer to my father today than when he was alive. I feel more at home in this body that has aged and changed in unimaginable ways than I felt when I still had breasts. What falls away is always. And is as near as is the living, breathing, generous life we are given, and as far away as the flung off slivers of our broken hearts.

4. You Can and Actually Need To Go Home Again

The Divorce Girl is the book I started writing in my mind when I was a teenager, narrating events that were so entirely crazy that only through telling myself the story could I have enough distance to see the events as short, although insane, episodes in what would become my long life. I started writing the novel itself over 16 years ago, taking the framework of what I had lived -- two parents who barricaded themselves in separate parts of the house during a year of domestic warfare, followed by a year of finding myself in the role of daughter-wife when I lived with just my father, followed by our middle-class Jewish family merging with a working class Catholic family -- and then

inserting all new characters.

Here is an excerpt with my main character, teenager Deborah Shapiro, who negotiates the world through her camera, running into her mother in the kitchen in the middle of her parents' divorce:

“I know why your dad goes there,” Mom began one afternoon. She’d cornered me as I was reaching into the refrigerator, trying to dislodge a pudding cup from behind a casserole. “That tall blonde waitress, the one with no bust. You know who I mean.”

I stood up and turned to find her staring at me earnestly, dressed in her white tennis outfit. How could I tell her she had it all wrong? I saw my camera lying on the counter and picked it up. It was an Olympus Dad got me from some sidewalk vendor in the city, or at least it looked like an Olympus.

“Oh, not that again,” Mom said.

“But you look good in that tennis outfit,” I told her, adjusting the F-stop.

She sighed. I thought she’d complain about how Dad should wait until he moved out of the house, how it wasn’t fair that he went out at night while she was home crying, worrying about the live baby and the ghost of a dead baby. But she didn’t. She just stood there, her hands on her hips, staring at me as I snapped a few pictures, the cacophony of the shutter quickly unfurling.

Dropping the screen that often made her seem too distant and unfamiliar to be my mother, she took my wrist between her thumb and fingers and looked into my eyes. “I want you home with me each night. Home,” she said.

I had never seen her cry before, although her voice was shaking when she talked on the phone once, a little while after the baby died, telling someone, “I never knew they could make coffins that tiny.”

She came up behind me now and put her freckled arms around my bony body, her voice shaking. “I don’t want this to hurt you, not to hurt you.”

I froze, wishing this scene were just another photograph. She never touched me, not with Roger still climbing in her lap and the baby always screaming from her playpen until Mom picked her up. I tried to remember the last time she told me she loved me, but it was too far back – before we moved to Jersey, before Joshua and before he died. I wanted to push her away and run, and at the same time I wanted to melt into her.

“You’re my girl,” she whispered, and something in me softened. I let her hold me tight, but I still didn’t lift my arms.

I lifted my hand now and placed it mechanically on her arm, part of me wanting her to hold me, part of me wanting her to let go.

Having spent so many years on this book, it's an immense gift to see it out, in my hands right now. Each reading, I feel my heart lift up, like a small boat riding a new wave across the lake. Having excavated the toxins out of my life through decades of writing, years of therapy, and opening my spirit

to the vibrancy of this living earth and living communities, I have come home to who I am in *The Divorce Girl*. Toward the end of this novel, Deborah explains this return better than I could:

Amidst the stars, suspended as if we were sailing through them, hung the moon in its old circle of cloud. I had watched this same moon as a child as it hovered steadily, the light around it a ring of pink fading into blue. Maybe I had seen this very scene all my life, yet it was what made me pick up my camera again and again. But now, for the first time, I was in the scene. And no matter how far I flew, the moon remained the same distance away, like a god who actually loves us from afar, or like love made visible – a darkness that the light shines on, a darkness ringed with color.

5. The Writer as Witness

Needle in the Bone: How a Holocaust Survivor and Polish Resistance Fighter Beat the Odds and Found Each Other, my forthcoming non-fiction book, tells the stories of Lou Frydman, who survived six concentration camps and three death marches, and Jarek Piekalkiewicz, a Polish resistance fighter who, at age 18, commanded 1,000 men in the Warsaw Uprising. Based on extensive oral histories with the men, I wrote this book to share their astonishing stories but also to grapple with some impossibilities: the nature of good and evil, how the most methodological and mechanized murder could happen, and what it means to be one of the only survivors of large, loving families. To write this as honestly as I could, I used a lot of the conversations I had with the men and their wives, Jane and Maura, word-for-word, showing them telling their stories rather than telling what these stories mean. I also braided my own responses, questions, moments of horror and confusion through the curving lines of their stories and the extensive research I did on the Holocaust and Polish Underground.

Here's an excerpt about a conversation we had over dinner at my house after most of the interviewing was done:

I ask Lou what he sees in Jarek's story. "He was a caring Polish nationalist, but not an exclusive nationalist. He had a big tent under his nationalism and Jews were included. I see bravery and human caring, and also devotion to Poland, Poland in a big tent. Inclusive."

He also reflects on the fact that, all too often, he and Jarek faced the same edge of death. "There were many, many different times he had close calls," Lou says of Jarek. "The same thing with me, like when I gave up on the death march. Expect the bullets, something happens, and you go on. When you're that tired, you can't even ask for mercy."

"Do you still see life this way? Things happen and you go on?"

"Absolutely," both men answer in unison.

In their present lives, Lou, Jarek, Jane, and Maura still carry the old worlds into the new one. Identity becomes a maze or forest when the world you came from is gone.

"How do you think of yourself, as an American or a Pole?"

"An American," says Jarek, without hesitation.

Lou laughs. "I just think of myself as a Jew."

“I’m Irish. Once you’re Irish, you’ll always be Irish,” Maura boldly announces.

Jane smiles quietly, then says, “I think of myself as a citizen of the world. I don’t identify with any country as my own.”

All of them, except perhaps Maura, come from worlds either buried or turned inside out. What they’re making is a new life in a new land, new families out of thin air that, while not replacing the ones that have been lost, at least help them make visible what they value most. They make meaning out of what’s beyond meaning.

Surely, the weight of an experience such as the Holocaust is made bearable only by what we can make out of the wreckage. Writing *Needle in the Bone* was a spiritual gift that keeps unfolding in my life. As writers, we have the potential to be containers for the stories of others, the history incident by incident, specific detail by specific detail of our communities. The writer as witness, and the witness honored enough to write between the visible and forgotten worlds.

6. An Occasion for the Writer

I write a lot of funeral poems as well as wedding, birthday, anniversary and other occasional poems. While some writers might shun such writing, I tend to lean toward the specifics that bring light to a rite of passage, pray and hope for the rhythm of the poem to carry me through, and then revise, revise, revise. When the loss is heavy, the writer can name that weight, and in doing so, hold a little or a lot of it or, at the least, support those holding the weight.

“In The End, There Is Only Kindness”

7. Writing as Jubilee

For years, I associated the word “jubilee” with either country music or Christianity, which sometimes go hand in hand, but several years back, someone told showed me the Jew in jubilee. Jubilee comes from the Hebrew tradition of letting the fields lie fallow every seven years, not surprisingly coinciding with six days of work and one day of Sabbath. Also, in ancient Judaism, there was a tradition of giving everything away when a person turns 49 -- 7 x 7 -- and beginning anew.

As I crossed through 49 and got well into my 50s, I’ve realized how much jubilee vibrates in my life. It’s not just that impulse to get rid of all those boxes in the basement that contain objects of no real value anymore -- even if I knew exactly what was in them -- or haul off all those lid-less plastic containers and extra six pie pans. I’m shedding old ideas about who I thought I was, how I’m not really the kind of person who does this or that as much as I thought, and how some of the myths I’ve spun about identity and the world turned out to be scaffolding that got me to the point where I no longer need them. The more I can see my habitual ruts pre-conceived frames for who someone or what something is, the more I step into the brave, beautiful world as it is: What falls away, what I can witness, how I can serve, what it is to be at home in my body and spirit, and to understand how we are all our whole lives at once, like trees with a ring for each year.

Jubilee

Are you ready to give it all up, the news

that isn't news, the sullen child calling the shots,
the scared grip of the fingers, the longing
of the spine? Are you ready to step out
into this new life, naked in the night rain?
Will you bring here the supposed treasures –
lost boys buried in cigar boxes, a glass bird
perched on the window box, the earnest wish
for someone to change her mind about you?

Jubilee is not all dance and fall.
Get up from that curb where you wait
for the parade of acceptance or the
nightmares of fear. Your life is not
made of the nameable.

The party has already started,
only a small flame that catches it all:
paper, rages, old shoes, miscarriages, empty
medicine bottles and torn blankets.
The fire that, once invited, consumes itself
and makes warmth for you, sitting there
in your new skin.

Now find or make another house.
Whatever comes, give away.
Don't wait for answers from authority,
don't push choices before their time.
Stand on the threshold, looking out,
imagining how one small bulb,
the size of dead newborn rabbit,
once in the ground, can winter itself
into the power of hyacinth.
Don't settle for anything less.

One of my favorite things about Judaism is the concept of Tikkun Olam (Tikkun meaning repair or perfect, an olam meaning world), a phrase originating from a 16th-century kabbalist that sees divine light contained in special vessels -- or Kelim -- some of which shattered and scattered, attaching light to fragments of evil, which gave these fragments power. Our work then is two-fold: find the light through what some call “contemplative performance of religious actions,” and then return it to the light of the divine.

We stand on the threshold, looking out at the world: we see the wreckage, dreck and waste, and also the moon rising over wreckage, dreck and waste. Our Tikkun Olam is writing this, and in the process, freeing the light from the dark, gathering it into a poem, a song, a story, a play that helps repair the world one word at a time.