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### Writing Together For Courage and Presence

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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# Writing Together for Courage and Presence

*Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg*  
*April 7 – May 26 \* Turning Point*

## 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, songs, 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.
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.

Prompts with an \* were used during our April sessions.

## Writing Prompts

1. Write your life story as a walk through a forest, prairie or other landscape in springtime. What's in bloom and taking shape? What changes over time and distance?

2. Write about how you're making something of the life you're handed.

**Second Chances\***

It isn't enough to be handed your life,  
delicate as an encyclopedia page,  
for you to protect.  
You are expected to make something of it too.  
Craft it, fold it, bend it,  
shape it.  
Shape it up.  
You tell yourself that again  
and again,  
and yet again.  
Sometimes it is part of what you pray.  
A promise of sorts.  
Or sometimes  
it's all you've got to say  
to God  
or to anyone.  
Because you do know  
it's good to be here  
with your life in your hands,  
and there are ways —  
there have got to be ways —  
to mold it  
to shape it  
    up  
and into something entirely new,  
a life you've never seen before  
and don't recognize.  
Your breasts are gone.  
The cancer is gone,  
they say.  
And you are  
    here.  
    Still.  
Holding this life,  
finally looking in the mirror.  
In fact,  
you look familiar.  
~ Tracy Rothschild Lynch

3. Read "Permission Granted" by David Allen Sullivan, and write your own response.

## Permission Granted\*

You do not have to choose the bruised peach  
or misshapen pepper others pass over.  
You don't have to bury  
your grandmother's keys underneath  
her camellia bush as the will states.

You don't need to write a poem about  
your grandfather coughing up his lung  
into that plastic tube—the machine's wheezing  
almost masking the kvetching sisters  
in their Brooklyn kitchen.

You can let the crows amaze your son  
without your translation of their cries.

You can lie so long under this  
summer shower your imprint  
will be left when you rise.

You can be stupid and simple as a heifer.  
Cook plum and apple turnovers in the nude.  
Revel in the flight of birds without  
dreaming of flight. Remember the taste of  
raw dough in your mouth as you edged a pie.

Feel the skin on things vibrate. Attune  
yourself. Close your eyes. Hum.  
Each beat of the world's pulse demands  
only that you feel it. No thoughts.  
Just the single syllable: *Yes...*

See the homeless woman following  
the tunings of a dead composer?  
She closes her eyes and sways  
with the subways. Follow her down,  
inside, where the singing resides.  
~ David Allen Sullivan.

4. After reading Rumi's poem, write about presence "in every small contraction and expansion," or take a line and run with it.

Your grief for what you've lost lifts a mirror  
up to where you're bravely working.

Expecting the worst, you look, and instead,  
here's the joyful face you've been longing to see.

Your hand opens and closes, and opens and closes.  
If it were always a fist or always stretched open  
you would be paralyzed.

Your deepest presence  
is in every small contraction and expansion,  
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated  
as bird wings.  
~ Rumi

5. Write your own "House of Dreams."

### **House of Dreams**

In the house of dreams  
there are pictures on the wall  
that smile at me  
when I wake up in the morning.

Through the ceiling  
I can communicate  
with my dead family members.

Sometimes my grandmother  
sits on the stairs  
drinking her coffee  
the way she used to do.

The fireplace flames up  
with memories of my life,  
a magical TV of dreams.

The cabinets open  
if I ask them to,  
and birds are free to fly  
all about the house.  
~ Reygen Pardilla, age 13

6. After listening to "Jubilee" by Mary Chapin Carpenter, use a line as your diving board, or writing about what you're surrendering and inviting into your life.

### **Jubilee\***

I can tell by the way you're walking, you don't want company  
I'll let you alone and I'll let you walk on and in your own good time you'll be  
Back where the sun can find you, under the wise wishing tree  
And with all of them made we'll lie under the shade and call it a jubilee

And I can tell by the way you're talking, that the past isn't letting you go  
There's only so long you can take it all on, and then the wrongs gotta be on its own  
And when you're ready to leave it behind you, you'll look back and all that you'll see  
Is the wreckage and rust you left in the dust on your way to the jubilee

And I can tell by the way you're listening, that you'll still expecting to hear  
Your name being called like a summons to all who have failed to account  
For their doubts and their fears, they can't add up to much without you  
And so if it were just up to me I'd take hold of your hand  
Saying come hear the band play your song at the jubilee

And I can tell by the way you're searching, for something you can't even name  
That you haven't been able to come to the table, simply glad that you came  
When you feel like this try to imagine that we're all like frail boats on the sea  
Just scanning the night for that great guiding light announcing the jubilee

And I can tell by the way you're standing with your eyes filling with tears  
That it's habit alone that keeps you turning for home, even though your home is right here  
Where the people who love you are gathered under the wise wishing tree  
May we all be considered then straight on delivered down to the jubilee

Because the people who love you are waiting, and they'll wait just as long as need be  
When we look back and say those were halcyon days  
We're talking about jubilee  
~ Mary Chapin Carpenter

7. Tell of a moment of peace when your life moved in you.

### **After All**

After all the meetings,  
after the endless phonecalls and the long phone messages  
I tilted my head back on the couch  
and felt my life move through me like a river.  
Though silence had been stripped out of my hands  
and an empty busyness been pounded in its place;  
and everyone up and down the street had heard too much  
or seen too much that day;  
still for an instant, with my throat exposed,  
and the blood pouring down toward the back of my brain;  
in one moment of peace my life moved in me

as a river of hope; and I was a light bark moved by its slightest motion.

~ Liz Rosenberg

8. What is hope beyond what Emily Dickinson calls “the thing with feathers”? Tell all the images that come to you.

### **Hope\***

It hovers in dark corners  
before the lights are turned on,  
it shakes sleep from its eyes  
and drops from mushroom gills,  
it explodes in the starry heads  
of dandelions turned sages,  
it sticks to the wings of green angels  
that sail from the tops of maples.  
It sprouts in each occluded eye  
of the many eyed potato,  
it lives in each earthworm segment  
surviving cruelty,  
it is the motion that runs the tail of a dog,  
it is the mouth that inflates the lungs  
of the child that has just been born.  
It is the singular gift  
we cannot destroy in ourselves,  
the argument that refutes death,  
the genius that invents the future,  
all we know of God.  
It is the serum which makes us swear  
not to betray one another;  
it is in this poem, trying to speak.  
~ Lisel Mueller

9. Write about a moment you felt lost and then how you found your way.

### **Lost**

Stand still. The trees ahead and the bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,  
I have made this place around you.  
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.  
No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.

If what a tree or bush does is lost to you,  
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you.  
~ David Wagoner

10. Write about visiting a scene made up in your mind.

### **Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow**

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,  
that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,  
an eternal pasture folded in all thought  
so that there is a hall therein

that is a made place, created by light  
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.

Wherefrom fall all architectures I am  
I say are likenesses of the First Beloved  
whose flowers are flames lit to the Lady.

She it is Queen Under The Hill  
whose hosts are a disturbance of words  
within words that is a field folded.

It is only a dream of the grass blowing  
east against the source of the sun  
in an hour before the sun's going down

whose secret we see in a children's game  
of ring a round of roses told.

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow  
as if it were a given property of the mind  
that certain bounds hold against chaos,

that is a place of first permission,  
everlasting omen of what is.

~ Robert Duncan

11. Consider moments of kindness in your life, and make a list of such moments when you gave or received genuine kindness. Then write the story of one such occasion, or write a list poem of all these moments, aiming toward the specifics that make the moment vivid.

### **Kindness\***



Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.  
How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.  
Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive.  
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.  
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend  
~ Naomi Shahib Nye

12. Riffing off the line, “Where am I standing, if I’m/ standing still,” tell us where you’re standing.

### **The Broken Sandal**

Dreamed the thong of my sandal broke.  
Nothing to hold it to my foot.  
How shall I walk?  
    Barefoot?  
The sharp stones, the dirt. I would hobble.

And— Where was I going?  
Where was I going I can't  
go to now, unless hurting?  
Where am I standing, if I'm  
to stand still now?  
~ Denise Levertov

13. Write about a passionate encounter with solitude.

### **Passion for Solitude**

I'm eating a little supper by the bright window.  
The room's already dark, the sky's starting to turn.  
Outside my door, the quiet roads lead,  
after a short walk, to open fields.  
I'm eating, watching the sky—who knows  
how many women are eating now. My body is calm:  
labor dulls all the senses, and dulls women too.

Outside, after supper, the stars will come out to touch  
the wide plain of the earth. The stars are alive,  
but not worth these cherries, which I'm eating alone.  
I look at the sky, know that lights already are shining  
among rust-red roofs, noises of people beneath them.  
A gulp of my drink, and my body can taste the life  
of plants and of rivers. It feels detached from things.  
A small dose of silence suffices, and everything's still,  
in its true place, just like my body is still.

All things become islands before my senses,  
which accept them as a matter of course: a murmur of silence.  
All things in this darkness—I can know all of them,  
just as I know that blood flows in my veins.  
The plain is a great flowing of water through plants,  
a supper of all things. Each plant, and each stone,  
lives motionlessly. I hear my food feeding my veins  
with each living thing that this plain provides.

The night doesn't matter. The square patch of sky  
whispers all the loud noises to me, and a small star  
struggles in emptiness, far from all foods,  
from all houses, alien. It isn't enough for itself,  
it needs too many companions. Here in the dark, alone,  
my body is calm, it feels it's in charge.  
~ Cesare Pavese

14. Write about what we create together – or what you hear in one another's words that moves you.

## **The Writing Group**

With joy we sit we cry  
we confess we are sorry  
we are anxious we are tongue-  
tied we are heart-bound we are  
safe we are falling off the cliff  
of our heart into a pool  
of unswum water so blue we think  
we are whales we are one  
we breach we cry we breathe  
we burst forth like a bull  
through the gate headfirst  
into the cape of our lives  
china splinters slivered translucent  
under an eclipsed moon oh watch us  
jump over mercy leap with  
our capes like wings  
that leave us splendid  
as never before  
we hover on a scarf of air  
wafted in from somewhere  
we have never been but plan to go  
as soon as possible  
yes we are speaking untying  
our tongues no longer sorry  
and then we come down  
and go to where we came from  
but something is different  
we are smiling our minds  
are blue and falling  
and nothing hurts Amen.  
~ Perie Longo

15. Write something addressing the earth directly.

### **Earth, You Have Returned to Me**

Can you imagine waking up  
every morning on a different planet,  
each with its own gravity?

Slogging, wobbling,  
wavering. Atilt  
and out-of-sync  
with all that moves

and doesn't.

Through years of trial  
and mostly error  
did I study this unsteady way —

changing pills, adjusting the dosage,  
never settling.

A long time we were separate,  
O Earth,  
but now you have returned to me.  
~ Elaine Equi

16. Write about something you started or planted – in the ground or in your life – during a hard time and how it evolved.

### **The Lilies**

When I learned I might have cancer,  
I bought fifteen white lilies. Easter was gone:  
the trumpets were wilted, plants crooked with roots  
bound in pots. I dug them into the garden,  
knowing they would not bloom for another year.  
All summer, the stalks stood like ramshackle posts  
while I waited for results. By autumn, the stalks  
had flopped down. More biopsies, laser incisions,  
the cancer in my tongue a sprawling mass. Outside,  
the earth remained bare, rhizomes shrunken  
below the frost line. Spring shoots appeared  
in bright green skins, and lilies bloomed  
in July, their waxed trumpets pure white,  
dusting gold pollen to the ground.

This year,  
tripled in number, they are popping up again. I wait,  
a ceremony, for the lilies to open, for the serpentine length  
of the garden to bloom in the shape of my tongue's scar,  
a white path with one end leading into brilliant air,  
the other down the throat's canyon, black  
and unforgiving. I try to imagine  
what could grow in such darkness. I am waiting  
for the lilies to open.  
~ KARENNE WOOD

17. Write about your own experience doing something that couldn't be done.

### **It Couldn't Be Done**

Somebody said that it couldn't be done  
But he with a chuckle replied  
That "maybe it couldn't," but he would be one  
Who wouldn't say so till he'd tried.  
So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin  
On his face. If he worried he hid it.  
He started to sing as he tackled the thing  
That couldn't be done, and he did it!

Somebody scoffed: "Oh, you'll never do that;  
At least no one ever has done it;"  
But he took off his coat and he took off his hat  
And the first thing we knew he'd begun it.  
With a lift of his chin and a bit of a grin,  
Without any doubting or quiddit,  
He started to sing as he tackled the thing  
That couldn't be done, and he did it.

There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done,  
There are thousands to prophesy failure,  
There are thousands to point out to you one by one,  
The dangers that wait to assail you.  
But just buckle in with a bit of a grin,  
Just take off your coat and go to it;  
Just start in to sing as you tackle the thing  
That "cannot be done," and you'll do it.  
~ Edgar Albert Guest

18. Write about the parade past your window on a May day.

### **May Day**

They go, the early flags, the gory maples—  
so too the daffodils & Lenten roses.  
Other petals swirl & nights warm.

Buds thicken and cast shadows:  
in a thunderstorm  
I almost forget the ice that was.

Narcissi suckle watery paths;  
meadows heap up emerald masses.  
How green & I want to delight

except this undertow—it pulls so fast  
passing before I recognize it—

like souls in Dante who can't see the present,

white lilacs curdle in pre-summer heat.  
The parade I barely noticed was beginning  
is already halfway down the street.

~ Tess Taylor

19. Here's an opportunity to write a wild and woolly poem to a cat, dog, bird, or other critter, or to write about where you find your wild gratitude.

### **Wild Gratitude**

Tonight when I knelt down next to our cat, Zooey,  
And put my fingers into her clean cat's mouth,  
And rubbed her swollen belly that will never know kittens,  
And watched her wriggle onto her side, pawing the air,  
And listened to her solemn little squeals of delight,  
I was thinking about the poet, Christopher Smart,  
Who wanted to kneel down and pray without ceasing  
In every one of the splintered London streets,

And was locked away in the madhouse at St. Luke's  
With his sad religious mania, and his wild gratitude,  
And his grave prayers for the other lunatics,  
And his great love for his speckled cat, Jeoffry.  
All day today—August 13, 1983—I remembered how  
Christopher Smart blessed this same day in August, 1759,  
For its calm bravery and ordinary good conscience.

This was the day that he blessed the Postmaster General  
"And all conveyancers of letters" for their warm humanity,  
And the gardeners for their private benevolence  
And intricate knowledge of the language of flowers,  
And the milkmen for their universal human kindness.  
This morning I understood that he loved to hear—  
As I have heard—the soft clink of milk bottles  
On the rickety stairs in the early morning,

And how terrible it must have seemed  
When even this small pleasure was denied him.  
But it wasn't until tonight when I knelt down  
And slipped my hand into Zooey's wagging mouth  
That I remembered how he'd called Jeoffry "the servant  
Of the Living God duly and daily serving Him,"  
And for the first time understood what it meant.  
Because it wasn't until I saw my own cat

Whine and roll over on her fluffy back  
That I realized how gratefully he had watched  
Jeffrey fetch and carry his wooden cork  
Across the grass in the wet garden, patiently  
Jumping over a high stick, calmly sharpening  
His claws on the woodpile, rubbing his nose  
Against the nose of another cat, stretching, or  
Slowly stalking his traditional enemy, the mouse,  
A rodent, "a creature of great personal valour,"  
And then dallying so much that his enemy escaped.

And only then did I understand  
It is Jeffrey—and every creature like him—  
Who can teach us how to praise—purring  
In their own language,  
Wreathing themselves in the living fire.  
~ Edward Hirsch

20. Write your own list of whimsical questions to Dear Abby (or any advice guru).

### **Alive**

Dear Abby, said someone from Oregon,  
I am having trouble with my boyfriend's attachment  
to an ancient gallon of milk still full  
in his refrigerator. I told him it's me or the milk,  
is this unreasonable? Dear Carolyn,  
my brother won't speak to me  
because fifty years ago I whispered  
a monkey would kidnap him in the night  
to take him back to his true family  
but he should have known it was a joke  
when it didn't happen, don't you think?  
Dear Board of Education, no one will ever  
remember a test. Repeat. Stories,  
poems, projects, experiments,  
mischief, yes, but never a test.  
Dear Dog Behind the Fence, you really need  
to calm down now. You have been barking every time  
I walk to the compost for two years  
and I have not robbed your house. Relax.  
When I asked the man on the other side  
if you bother him too, he smiled and said no,  
he makes me feel less alone. Should I be more  
worried about the dog or the man?  
~ Naomi Shahib Nye

21. Write about what you are ready to give back.....or what fear you're ready to release or have released.

### **I Give You Back**

I release you, my beautiful and terrible  
fear. I release you. You were my beloved  
and hated twin, but now, I don't know you  
as myself. I release you with all the  
pain I would know at the death of  
my children.  
You are not my blood anymore.  
I give you back to the soldiers  
who burned down my house, beheaded my children,  
raped and sodomized my brothers and sisters.  
I give you back to those who stole the  
food from our plates when we were starving.  
I release you, fear, because you hold  
these scenes in front of me and I was born  
with eyes that can never close.  
I release you  
I release you  
I release you  
I release you  
I am not afraid to be angry.  
I am not afraid to rejoice.  
I am not afraid to be black.  
I am not afraid to be white.  
I am not afraid to be hungry.  
I am not afraid to be full.  
I am not afraid to be hated.  
I am not afraid to be loved.  
to be loved, to be loved, fear.  
Oh, you have choked me, but I gave you the leash.  
You have gutted me but I gave you the knife.  
You have devoured me, but I laid myself across the fire.  
I take myself back, fear.  
You are not my shadow any longer.  
I won't hold you in my hands.  
You can't live in my eyes, my ears, my voice  
my belly, or in my heart my heart  
my heart my heart  
But come here, fear  
I am alive and you are so afraid  
of dying.

~ Joy Harjo – see her performing this here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAYCf2Gdycc>



You can find Caryn's blog and more writing prompts at <http://carynmirriamgoldberg.com/>

See our blog at <http://mytreecalledlife.wordpress.com/>  
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