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A Deep Winter Writing Retreat

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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A Deep Winter Writing Retreat

January * 2004

Lawrence, Kansas

1. Describe what your life would look like if you were not, in any way, “simply just visiting this world.” Or take the line, “When it’s over, I want to say: all my life...” and use it as a diving board.

When Death Comes

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
ending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder
if I had made of my life something particular and real.
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.

-- Mary Oliver

2. Write of the moment when something intrinsic to your life arrived for the first time
– writing, art, business, love, a spiritual practice, etc.

Poetry

And it was at that age...Poetry arrived
in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where
it came from, from winter or a river.
I don't know how or when,
no, they were not voices, they were not
words, nor silence,
but from a street I was summoned,
from the branches of night,
abruptly from the others,
among violent fires,
or returning alone,
there I was without a face
and it touched me.

I did not know what to say, my mouth
had no way
with names
my eyes were blind,
and something started in my soul,
fever or forgotten wings,
and I made my way,
deciphering
that fire,
and I wrote the first faint line,
faint, without substances, pure
nonsense,
pure wisdom
of someone who knows nothing,
and suddenly I saw

the heavens
unfastened
and open,
planets,
palpitating plantations,
shadow perforated,
riddled
with arrows, fire and flowers,
the winding night, the universe.

And I, infinitesimal being,
drunk with the great starry
void,
likeness, image of
mystery,
felt myself a pure part
of the abyss,

I wheeled with the stars,
my heart broken loose on the wind.
-- Pablo Neruda
Translated by Alastair Reid

3. Write about a time your life has opened. Don't think – just write.

Three Times My Life Has Opened

Three times my life has opened.
Once, into darkness and rain.
Once, into what the body carries at all times within in and
starts to remember each time it enters the act of love.
Once, to the fire that holds all.
These three were not different.
You will recognize what I am saying or you will not.
But outside my window all day a maple has stepped
from her leaves like a woman in love with winter, dropping
the colored silks.
Neither are we different in what we know.
There is a door. It opens. Then it is closed. But a slip of
light stays, like a scarp of unreadable paper left on the floor,
or the one red leaf the snow releases in March.
-- Jane Hirshfield

4. Breathe slowly and let yourself remember fully a time that was dark and sweet for you. Breathe into this memory slowly. Then exhale very slowly, and begin writing your own sweet darkness story or realization.

Sweet Darkness

When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone
no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.

The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness
to learn

anything or anyone
that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.

-- David Whyte

5. What would it mean for you to think in ways you never thought before? Or, begin with the line, “when someone knocks on the door, think that he’s (or she’s) about....” and fill in what new thing could come to you at such a moment.

Things to Think

Think in ways you’ve never thought before
If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message
Larger than anything you’ve ever heard,
Vaster than a hundred lines of Yeats.

Think that someone may bring a bear to the door,
Maybe wounded and deranged; or think that a moose
Has risen out of the lake, and he’s carrying on his antlers
A child of your own whom you’ve never seen.

When someone knocks on the door, think that he’s about
To give you something large: tell you you’re forgiven,
Or that it’s not necessary to work all the time, or that it’s
Been decided that if you down no one will die.

-- Robert Bly

6. What does the breath inside your breath say?

Breath

Are you looking for me? I am in the next seat.
My shoulder is against yours.
You will not find me in stupas, not in Indian shrine rooms,
nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals:
not in masses, nor kirtans, not in legs winding around you
own neck, nor in eating nothing but vegetables.
When you really look for me, you will see me instantly –
you will find me in the tiniest house of time.

Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is God?
He is the breath inside the breath.

-- Kabir
translated by Robert Bly

7. After relaxing and making contact with your body, start writing with the phrase, "This is my..." and put in any part of you – physical or otherwise (your lungs, your stamina, your heart, your feet), and see what it has to say.

This is My Heart

This is my heart. It is a good heart.
Bones and membrane of mist and fire
are the woven cover.
When we make love in the flower world
my heart is close enough to sing
to yours in a language that has no use
for clumsy human words.

My hear is a good head, but it is a hard head
and it whirrs inside a swarm of worries.
What is the source of this singing, it asks
and if there is a source why can't I see it
right here, right now
as real as these hands hammering
the world together
with nails and sinew?

This is my soul. It is a good soul.
It tells me, "Come here forgetful one."
And we sit together with lilt of small winds
who rattle the scrub oak.
We cook a little something
to eat, then a sip of something
sweet, for memory.

This is my song. It is a good song.
It walked forever the border of fire and water
climbed ribs of desire to my lips to sing to you.
Its new wings quiver with vulnerability.
Come lie next to me, says my heart.
Put your head here.
It is a good thing, says my soul.

-- Joy Harjo

8. Using one of those evocative fragmentary quotes, begin your own writing:

"Come into the animal presence..." (Denise Levertov)
"And the body, what about the body?" (Jane Kenyon)

“This earth, burnished by hearing the Name, is so certain of Love...” (Ghalib)
 “I dwell in Possibility” (Emily Dickinson)
 “The world is charged with the grandeur of God” (Gerald Manley Hopkins)
 “The earth says have a place, be what that place/ requires...” (William Stafford)
 “Every angel is terrible...” (Rainer Maria Rilke)
 “There are names for what binds us...” (Jane Hirshfield)
 “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing/ there is a field.
 I’ll meet you there...” (Rumi)
 “Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back...” (George Herbert)
 “The point of life is to know what’s enough...” (Gensei)
 “Inside this jar the music of eternity, and a spring flows from the
 the source of all waters” (Kabir)
 “...we awaken as the Beloved in every last part of our body” (Symeon the New
 Theologian)
 “I felt a funeral in my brain....” (Emily Dickinson)
 “Let us go then you and I, when the even is spread upon the sky” (T.S. Eliot)
 “The things I did, I did because of trees...” (Marvin Bell)
 “...you are our true life,/ luminous, wonderful,/ awakening the heart/
 from its ancient sleep.” (Hildegard of Bingen)
 “Dear God, I am writing you a memory I hope I will have...” (Donna Gates)
 “Any minute now, something will happen” (Raymond Carver)
 “You split me, tore my heart/ open, filled me with love.” (Song of Solomon)
 “The Great Way has no gate...” (Wu-Men)
 “To the flashing water say: I am” (Rainer Maria Rilke)

9. Write from the vantage point of a flower. Or write what it means to survive after facing such a struggle.

Snowdrops

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know
 what despair is; then
 winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive,
 earth suppressing me. I didn’t expect
 to waken again, to feel
 in damp earth my body
 able to respond again, remembering
 after so long how to open again
 in the cold light
 of earliest spring –

afraid, yes, but among you again
 crying yes risk joy

in the raw wind of the new world.

~~ Louise Gluck

10. Imagine your life as a tree with the core wood as your birth and each ring as another year. What do you see when you look at all these layers together? Or write

your response to, "How shall the heart be reconciled/ to its feast of losses?" Or write about what changes in your life you are not yet done with? Or write what's written already in your "book of transformations."

The Layers

I have walked through many lives,
some them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.
Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.
Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with the will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.
In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
"Live in the layers,
not on the litter."
Through I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

-- Stanley Kunitz

11. After reading Raymond Carver's small poem, ask yourself the same question: "And did you get what/ you wanted from this life, even so?" and write all that comes to you.

Late Fragment

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.
-- Raymond Carver

12. After the winter journey to a clearing exercise, write about you discovered, what you saw along the way and in the clearing. Or take any of the three revelations in the second stanza and write about an experience you had that illustrates this revelation.

Le Cri de Merlin

It is winter, and you have come
alone to a clearing in the wood.
Close your eyes and imagine you are
Merlin, shape-changer and androgyny,
come to the forest Broceliande.
So transformed in your inward being,
slowly open your eyes and look at
the clearing, circle of trees,
snow and shadows, and then
let all dissolve into turbulence
of color and form, intense
longing, and owl's cry.

If you follow these instructions,
and if your heart is pure,
you will experience three revelations.
First is the knowledge
that it has taken a lifetime
to arrive at this place;
second is the conviction
that you are most alive
in the act of discovery;
and third is the fact
that observation changes
the thing observed.

Look! It is winter, and you have come
alone to this clearing in the wood,
a familiar place you have never
seen before. Do not hurry to leave,
but when at last you turn away,

remember this, if you remember nothing else:
You are no longer who you were.

-- Robert Collen

13. Take any sentence from this poem, or the title itself, and use it as a springboard into your own writing. Or write what you are rising in perilous hope in or of yourself.

Rising In Perilous Hope

What can I hold in my hands this morning
that will not flow through my fingers?
What words can I say that will catch
in your mind like burrs, chiggers that burrow?
If my touch could heal, I would lay my hands
on your bent head and bellow prayers.
If my words could change the weather
or the government or the way the world
twists and guts us, fast or slow,
what could I do but what I do now?
I fit words together and say them;
it is a given like the color of my eyes.
I hope it makes a small difference, as
I hope the drought will break and the morning
come rising out of the ocean wearing
a cloak of clean sweet mist and swirling terns.

-- Marge Piercy

14. What do you want to place in the mouth of language?

When I Am Asked

When I am asked
how I began writing poems
I talk about the indifference of nature.

It was soon after my mother died,
a brilliant June day,
everything blooming.

I sat on a gray stone bench
in a lovingly planted garden,
but the day lilies were as deaf
as the ears of drunken sleepers
and the roses curved inward.

Nothing was black or broken
and not a leaf fell
and the sun blared endless commercials
for summer holidays.

I sat on a gray stone bench
ringed with the ingenue faces
of pink and white impatiens
and placed my grief
in the mouth of language
-- Lisel Mueller

15. Starting each sentence with the word, "Let," write your own invocation to letting something come – evening, morning, peace, love, joy, clarity, winter, spring, whatever comes to you.

Let Evening Come

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in the long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to the air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.
-- Jane Kenyon

16. Imagine your inner emotional landscape in the midst of winter right now. Look where there is ice and snow, where there is thawing already happening, where there is release and burrowing, where there is the widest view. Write about your wandering through this landscape.

17. Write the story of something that happened in your life on an outrageously cold day or night. Be specific.

18. After reading the poem by Lucille Clifton, write your own praise song about a moment danger or loss was averted.

Praise Song

to my aunt blanch
who rolled from grass to driveway
into the street one Sunday morning.
i was ten. i had never seen
a human woman hurl her basketball
of a body into the traffic of the world.
Praise to the drivers who stopped in time.
Praise to the faith with which she rose
after some moments then slowly walked
sighing back to her family.
Praise to the arms which understood
little or nothing of what it meant
but welcomed her in without judgment,
accepting it all like children might,
like God.

-- Lucille Clifton

19. Write of meeting your muse. Be very specific about all the details of where you met him or her and what s/he has to say.

When I met My Muse

I glanced at her and took my glasses
off – they were still singing. They buzzed
like a locust at the coffee table and then
ceased. Her voice belled forth, and the
sunlight bent. I felt the ceiling arch, and
knew that nails up there took a new grip
on whatever they touched. “I am your own
way of looking at things,” she said. “When
you allow me to live with you, every
glance at the world around you will be
a sort of salvation.” And I took her hand.

-- William Stafford

20. After listening to Claudia Schmidt sing Bob Franke’s song, “Hard Love,” write about “the only kind of miracle that’s worthy of its name in your life.”

I remember growing up like it only yesterday.
Mom and Daddy tried their best to guide me on my way
but the hard times and the liquor drove the easy love away
and the only love I knew about was hard love.
It was hard love every hour of the day
when Christmas to my birthday was a million years away
and the fear that came between them drove the tears into my play.
There was love in Daddy’s house but it was hard love.

I recall the gentle courtesy you showed me when
to dissemble in politeness all the love I felt inside,
and for every song of laughter was another song that cried,
this ain't no easy weekend, this is hard love.
It was hard love every step of the way,
hard to be so close to you and hard to turn away
and when all the stars and sentimental songs dissolve away,
there was nothing left to sing about but hard love.

So I love you for your courage and your gentle sense of shame
and I love you for your laughter and your language and your name,
and I knew it was impossible but I loved you just the same
and the only love I gave to you was hard love.
It was hard love, it was hard on you, I know
when the only love I gave to you was love I couldn't show.
You forgave the heart that loved you as your lover turned to go,
leaving nothing but the memory of hard love.

Now I'm standing in this phone booth with a dollar and a dime
wondering what to say to you to ease your troubled mind.
The lord's cross might redeem us but our own just wastes our time
and to tell the two apart is always hard love.
So I'll tell that I love you even through I'm far away.
I'll tell you how you change me as I live from day to day,
how you help me to accept myself and I won't forget to say
love is never wasted even when it's hard love.
It's hard love but it's love all the same,
not the stuff of fantasies but more than just a game
and the only kind of miracle that's worthy of the name
for the love that heals our lives is mostly hard love.

21. Here's is a poem by Dick Laurie narrated at the end of the movie, "Smoke Signals."
After reading it, consider someone close to you – particularly one who raised you – who
is hard to forgive, and write, "how do we forgive our....." and speak for yourself and
others who struggle between such love and loss. Consider especially writing this by
asking questions about how forgiveness happens, or could happen.

How do we forgive our fathers, maybe in a dream?
Do we forgive our fathers for leaving us too often or forever when we were little,
maybe for scaring us with unexpected rage or making us nervous
because there never seemed to be any rage at all there?
Do we forgive our fathers for marrying or not marrying our mothers,
for divorcing or not divorcing our mothers?
And shall we forgive them for their excesses of warmth or coldness?
Shall we forgive them for pushing or leaning or shutting doors
or speaking through walls or never speaking or never being silent?
Do we forgive our fathers in our age or theirs,
or in their deaths, saying it to them or not saying it?
If we forgive our fathers what is left?

-- Dick Laurie

Ground Rules for Writing Workshops

compiled by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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.
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. You can respond with comments with any comments that speak your heart and that honor the writing such as:
 - “I really like the line or image in your writing about....”
 - “What moves me or touches me about your writing is....”
 - “What speaks to me about your writing is.....”
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.

Upcoming Writing Retreats

More detailed descriptions at www.writewhereyouare.org

Write from the World: The International Language of the Soul

1-6 p.m., Sun. March 14th, Southwind Health Collective, 941 Kentucky, Lawrence, KS.
Drawing on poetry and prose from writers around the world, we'll look at how writers in other languages (all translated to English of course) speak of life's meaning, and how such words help us unearth the truest language of our own souls. We'll be reading writers from Russia, Chile, Iran, Japan, Germany, Kenya and much more to help connect with other cultures and tradition, and to move us new ways toward our own words. \$60 includes all hand-outs and extensive refreshments. Optional dinner in downtown Lawrence afterwards.

Write from the Earth: An Eco-poetics Retreat

1-6 p.m., Sunday, April 4th in the country just south of Lawrence, KS.
Writing can help us reinhabit our bodies, our psyches, and the earth. Writing can bring restoration to our lives and our life-places. Join a supportive circle for a long afternoon exploring and experiencing how the poems, stories and journal entries we write can bring us closer to ourselves and to the earth. Weather-permitting, our workshop will include short walks in native prairie and woods (wear comfortable shoes), and we'll do many writing exercises outside with a panoramic view of hills and fields. \$60 per person includes refreshments and extensive hand-outs of writing from the earth exercises.

Write from the Soul: Writing as a Spiritual Practice.

1-6 p.m., Sunday, May 23rd in the country just south of Lawrence, KS.
The act of putting pen to paper and diving into the unknown is an act that helps us cultivate our courage and creativity, and in the process, wakes us up more to a soulful awareness of life. In this restorative workshop, we'll dwell in woodlands and prairie (weather-permitting), alone and in the sacred circle we make together, to write toward what's holy in us and around us. \$60 includes all handouts and ample refreshments. Directions will be sent to you once you register for the class. Please contact carynken@mindspring.com or 785/843-0253 to register.

Write Where You Are

1-6 p.m., Sunday, June 6th, Southwind Health Collective, 941 Kentucky, Lawrence, KS.
Write what you know into what you don't yet know. Write as a spiritual and healing practice to become more aware of where you are and what you have to say. Write to create, and feel more alive. Write to wake up. This writing workshop brings you many opportunities to discover yourself, your life, and your memories, experiences and dreams. \$60 includes bountiful refreshments and handouts. Optional dinner together afterwards in beautiful downtown Lawrence. *Note: If you've taken this class before, you're always welcome back! New exercises and discussions infuse each new class.*

**Coming Home to Ourselves: Painting and Writing
to Reinhabit Our Bodies and the Earth**

with Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg and Danielle LaFleur

1-6 p.m., Sunday, July 11th, Earthcurve Studio in Kansas City, MO.

Fill your heart, replenish your soul and reinhabit your body more fully during this one day writing and painting retreat. Through opening ourselves to the process of creation more, we can cultivate new new understanding about the connections between our bodies and the living earth. We'll paint and write, letting the images, textures, motion of our moving hands, rhythms and words unfold more of our memories, perceptions, challenges and gifts. The painting and writing will help us bring to the surface what wants voice and witness from within; it will also help us hear more of what our body and the earth around us has to say when it comes through our art and words.

Weather-permitting, we will also incorporate prayer or meditation walking and writing outside into our day together. \$60 includes all materials. Space is limited so please register early. For more information on Danielle LaFleur and Earthcurve Studio, please visit www.earthcurve.com.

WORKSHOP INFORMATION:

- * Workshops fill fast, so please register early.
- * All writing exercises lend themselves to any genre of writing: journal entries, poetry, stories, dialogue, letters, etc. Feel free to experiment.
- * Reading your work aloud is always optional.
- * Workshops held in the country (south of Lawrence location) are in my home, complete with cats and dog.
- * If you've taken any of these retreats before, feel free to join us again: new exercises abound in each new session along with some tried and true ones.
- * If you have special refreshment requests due to dietary restrictions, please be in touch.
- * If you cancel your registration at least one week before the workshop date, you will receive a full refund; after that time, your deposit is applied toward any future workshop you take within one year.
- * For references, or more information, or to register, please contact me: 785/843-0253, carynken@mindspring.com, 1357 N. 1000 Rd., Lawrence, KS. 66046, or visit the website at www.writewhereyouare.org.

NAME _____ PHONE _____

ADDRESS _____

EMAIL _____

WRITING INTERESTS _____

FAVORITE BOOK(S) _____

WORKSHOP(S):

All workshops are \$60 each. Please include a \$30 deposit to hold your place.

- ___ Write from the World, Sun., Mar. 14th (Southwind Health Collective, Lawrence)
- ___ Write from the Earth, Sun., April 4th (south of Lawrence)
- ___ Write from the Soul, Sun., May 23rd (south of Lawrence)
- ___ Write Where You Are, Sun., June 6th (Southwind Health Collective, Lawrence)
- ___ Coming Home to Ourselves: Painting and Writing, Sun., July 11th (Kansas City)