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# *Writing Your Own Tree of Life*

*with Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg*  
*Temple Beth Torah \* September, 2013*

## *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.
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.

## Writing Prompts

1. In considering your roots, make a list or a family tree of all your ancestors as far back as you know about. Then try one of these writing prompts:

- Write a letter from one of your grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents or another family member to you and your family now. Then write back to him or her.
- Write a dialogue between a family member, or several family members, and yourself, focusing on what's most important to life, and what advice they would share with you and your family.
- Write your own letter or manifesto to the generation not yet here -- your children's children or grandchildren. Tell this next generation what means the most to you in your life, what you've learned about how to live, and give examples from stories important to you.
- Draw or find a large image of a tree, and make small circles that you can use to hold pictures (if digitalized, just copy and paste onto a document, and then cut it out as a circle) and a phrase that sums up something vital about each person's life.

2. After reading e.e. cummings's poem, start with the line, "here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud/ and the sky of the sky of a tree called life" as your first line or title, and write what comes to you. Or take any line from this poem as your diving board into a poem, story, essay or short prose piece.

[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in]

i carry your heart with me(i carry it in  
my heart)i am never without it(anywhere  
i go you go,my dear;and whatever is done  
by only me is your doing,my darling)  
  i fear

no fate(for you are my fate,my sweet)i want  
no world(for beautiful you are my world,my true)  
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant  
and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows  
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows  
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)  
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)  
    ~ e.e. cummings

3. Focusing on roots, make a list of all that's been given to you as your life's foundation (everything from a comfortable bed as a child to the air that you breathe). Then arrange what you come up with as a list poem, which could be called "The Trunk," "What's Been Given To Me," "What Do You Believe In?" or "What Do You Count On?"

## What Do You Believe In?

The wind across the road and the tumbleweed  
that follows it, the night and the stars,  
the last coherent thought, and especially  
what comes next. A hand on my shoulder.  
The wooden stairs bare and wanting carpet  
from the house where I grew up leading  
to the one where I live now, my mother's laughter  
on the phone, the sudden falling in a dream  
before waking, the dark made by thing on thing,  
the chance smile of a stranger on a side street,  
my youngest son's hand in mine as he leads me  
down the hall, the cranes stenciling the sky behind  
the one leaf just breaking from the tree, all the trees  
that turn light into something else, a blue bird quick  
past the window, a secret pond to gather at  
in our dreams, all manner of water,  
arms wide open, breast plate leading  
into the wind, a lifting of the uncontainable  
out of the contained.

~ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

4. In thinking about branches -- how you're growing in your life, what you're reaching for and embracing, what you're seeking and finding, write a short answer to each of these questions. Then remove the questions, add some connective tissue (a phrase or sentence connecting one answer to the next), and read over what you've written. Feel free to add in more over time.

- What do you seek most in life? Tell a story.
- What do you reach toward in your day-to-day words and deeds? Give an example.
- We all have edges to work on, places where we reach the end of what we know, who we think we are, what we can do, how we see things, and need to reach beyond this edge to find new ways of knowing, being and doing. Tell a story of stepping off an old edge, and discovering something new about yourself and/or the world.
- How do you want to be remembered? Be specific.
- What do you love most about being alive? Give the details.

5. After reading William Stafford's poem, take one of his questions, and use it to uncover your own answer.

## You Reading This, Be Ready

Starting here, what do you want to remember?  
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?  
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened  
sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world  
than the breathing respect that you carry  
wherever you go right now? Are you waiting  
for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this  
new glimpse that you found; carry into evening  
all that you want from this day. This interval you spent  
reading or hearing this, keep it for life—

What can anyone give you greater than now,  
starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?  
~ William Stafford

6. What are the leaves on your tree of life? Consider how leaves emerge, unfurl, blow in the wind, age, and let go. Or write in response to Oliver's affirmation that "To live in this world/ you must be able/ to do three things."

### **In Blackwater Woods**

Look, the trees  
are turning  
their own bodies  
into pillars

of light,  
are giving off the rich  
fragrance of cinnamon  
and fulfillment,

the long tapers  
of cattails  
are bursting and floating away over  
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,  
and every pond,  
no matter what its  
name is, is

nameless now.  
Every year  
everything  
I have ever learned

in my lifetime

leads back to this: the fires  
and the black river of loss  
whose other side

is salvation,  
whose meaning  
none of us will ever know.  
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.

~ Mary Oliver

7. In the Book of Proverbs, it is written: “[Wisdom] is a tree of life to all who grasp it, and whoever holds on to it is happy; its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace” (Proverbs 3:17-18). How have you held the tree of life? In other words, consider a moment when you landed on true wisdom, peace and joy, and tell that story.

8. According to Kabbalah as well as many holy texts in Judaism, the true essence of God is beyond our naming; thus, the many names for God that fill our prayerbooks, services, hagaddahs and other guides. Make a list of all that embodied God for you, such as specific moments (your child falling asleep in your arms), images (a particularly vibrant sunset), or experiences (how you felt when you finally got to the top of a mountain you were climbing for six hours). Then consider a name for what you write, such as, “All That is Holy,” “What’s Beyond Naming,” “What’s Sacred to Me,” “Ways to Know God.”

9. In Kabbalist teachings, *Atzilut* (which connotes the divine universe of being) means “root,” “origin,” “to join,” “conjunction,” “proximity - to be near, by the side,” and especially “to stand next to.” Write about your own *Atzilut*: what and who you stand next to.

10. Write your own psalm or praise poem, or a blessing, for someone or something beautiful and awesome to you.

### **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

11. Start with “We tell beginnings,” “Nourish Beginnings” or another line in this poem, and write about beginnings.

### **from “Elegy for Joy”**

We tell beginnings: for the flesh and the answer,  
or the look, the lake in the eye that knows,  
for the despair that flows down in widest rivers,  
cloud of home; and also the green tree of grace,  
all in the leaf, in the love that gives us ourselves.

The word of nourishment passes through the women,  
soldiers and orchards rooted in constellations,  
white towers, eyes of children:  
saying in time of war What shall we feed?  
I cannot say the end.

Nourish beginnings, let us nourish beginnings.  
Not all things are blest, but the  
seeds of all things are blest.  
The blessing is in the seed.

This moment, this seed, this wave of the sea, this look, this instant of love.  
Years over wars and an imagining of peace. Or the expiation journey  
toward peace which is many wishes flaming together,  
fierce pure life, the many-living home.  
Love that gives us ourselves, in the world known to all  
new techniques for the healing of the wound,  
and the unknown world. One life, or the faring stars.

~ Muriel Rukeyser

12. Write your own “Prayer for the Protection and Opening of the Heart” or whatever calls you to write a prayer for it at this moment.

### **Prayers for the Protection and Opening of the Heart**

I

May the Name send its hidden radiance  
to open the gates of deliverance  
to His servants—and shine in their hearts,  
which now are shut in silent darkness.

May the great King be moved  
to act in perfection and righteousness—  
to open the gates of wisdom for us  
and waken the love of old, the love of ancient days.

ii

By the power of the hidden Name *I-am-that-I-am*,  
and by the dew of Desire and Blessing, the dead will live again...

iii

*I-am* is the power of your Name in concealment,  
and one who knows its mystery dwells in eternity's instant.

Over the world, it pours forth abundance and favor,  
and on it all worlds hang, like grapes in a cluster.

Send the dew of blessing, the dew of grace;  
renew my dispensation, and grant me length of days.

Bring light to my eyes with your teaching, and let not the husks  
that surround your hosts obstruct me.  
May Heaven and Adam's children judge me with mercy.

Sustain me with their strength and fortune—  
but do not leave me in need of the gifts of men.  
~ Ya'akov Hakohen, translated by Peter Cole

13. Write your own “Poem Without An End.”

### **Poem Without An 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

14. Take a biblical story, and rewrite it from another perspective, such as if it were narrated by someone unseen, or by an object. You can also write beyond the ending of the story.

### **Hagar on the Mountain**

I climb to the sound  
of javelinas eating cactus.  
In the path a kit fox stops,  
looks up, afraid I would try  
to touch. I bend slowly  
to lower our son to the rocks.  
No fox. Microscopic insects  
sleep in my sweat.

The boy wakes and asks why  
we do not build a fire big enough  
for Abraham to find us.  
I lift him and let his head  
weigh against the bone  
of my shoulder. At the top field  
wind rises. Our voices rust  
in the thinning air.

I will carry him all night  
if I must, my son's whisper songs  
telling me how the water  
falls over the side of rock,  
my hand on his forearm,  
promising something.

A place to stop, a well

surrounded by animals  
where we'll learn to dream God's dream  
like all the others.

~ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

15. Make a list of your fencepost stories -- the moments in your life when something significant happened, whether small (it rained), medium-sized (your first job), or large (losing your father). Keep adding to this list over it -- it is, indeed, your own torah of important stories that shape you and teach you over time. Take one item off the list, and write it.

16. Write what you have only begun to know in your life.

### **Beginners**

“From too much love of living,  
Hope and desire set free,  
Even the weariest river  
Winds somewhere to the sea--“

But we have only begun  
To love the earth.

We have only begun  
To imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope?  
-- so much is in bud.

How can desire fail?  
-- we have only begun

to imagine justice and mercy,  
only begun to envision

how it might be  
to live as siblings with beast and flower,  
not as oppressors.

Surely our river  
cannot already be hastening  
into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot  
drag, in the silt,  
all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet--

there is too much broken  
that must be mended,

too much hurt we have done to each other  
that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know  
the power that is in us if we would join  
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding that must  
complete its gesture,

so much is in bud.

~ Denise Levertov

17. Imagine your childhood as a house, and visit, looking for (despite or because of what flavor of dysfunction you grew up with) what's particularly marvelous

### **Sometimes, When the Light**

Sometimes, when the light strikes at odd angles  
and pulls you back into childhood

and you are passing a crumbling mansion  
completely hidden behind old willows

or an empty convent guarded by hemlocks  
and giant firs standing hip to hip,

you know again that behind that wall,  
under the uncut hair of the willows

something secret is going on,  
so marvelous and dangerous

that if you crawled through and saw,  
you would die, or be happy forever.

~ Lisel Mueller

18. Ask yourself Carver's question, "And did you get what/ you wanted from this life, even so?"

### **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

### **Getting Started on a Regular Writing Practice**

You can write just about anyway, but for most people, the trick is getting started. Here are some tips.

*Who will teach me to write? a reader wanted to know.  
The page, the page, that eternal blankness, the blankness of  
eternity which you cover slowly, affirming time's scrawl as a right  
and your daring as necessity; the page, which you cover woodenly,  
ruining it, but asserting your freedom and power to act, acknowledging  
that you ruin everything you touch but touching it nevertheless,  
because acting is better than being here in mere opacity; the page, which  
you cover slowly with the crabbed thread of your gut; the page of  
your death, against which you pit such flawed excellences as you can  
muster with all your life's strength; that page will teach you to write.  
There is another way of saying this. Aim for the chopping block.  
If you aim for the wood, you will have nothing. Aim past the wood, aim  
through the wood; aim for the chopping block.  
— Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life**

- Pick a regular time and place to write — it can be 10 minutes when you wake up or before bed, one hour each Thursday afternoon at a local coffee shop, every Monday night at the library, or whatever else works for you. Having a regular place to go to write — even if it's just a certain chair in your house or on your porch — will help reinforce the writing: every time you sit there, you'll be reminded this is your writing spot, which can help get the writing flowing.
- Aim for just short stretches. You can write quite a bit in 10 or 15 minutes, and writing for that length of time isn't so daunting when you're not feeling particularly inspired. Doctors' office waiting rooms are a great place to write!
- Or aim for a certain length — you might decide you'll write at least two sentences or fill half a page every three days.
- Make writing dates with others — it's a lot like workout dates: when the other person shows up, even if you didn't feel like jogging or biking, you're more apt to do it in the presence of others who depend on you. Meet at a home, coffee shop, restaurant, park, favorite bluff or wherever else suits you. You can each bring one writing exercise to try out together.
- You can also find lots of writing resources at the Transformative Language Arts Resource Page ([www.TLAresources.wordpress.com](http://www.TLAresources.wordpress.com)). Look under “expressive and creative writing” for great books. My favorites are Deena Metzger's *Writing From Your Life*, Susan G. Wooldridge's *Poemcrazy*,

Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* and John Lee's *Writing From the Body*.

- Keeping a running list in your journal, on a pad or in your computer of writing ideas.
- If you stop for a while, start again. The page is always waiting for you.

More information: [www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.com](http://www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.com)

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