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March 2023

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Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "TRANSFORMATIVE LANGUAGE ARTS & RECLAIMING OUR BEAUTY" (2023).
Essays. 35.

https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cmj_essays/35

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TRANSFORMATIVE LANGUAGE ARTS & RECLAIMING OUR BEAUTY

TRANSFORMATIVE LANGUAGE ARTS

About a decade ago, I realized that how I used writing in my life – to create works of art, but also to give space to whatever prima donna emotions took center stage so that the more quiet players could have their turn, and to promote social change – put me in good company with many others who also used writing for changing themselves and the world. This spark of recognition led to the development of a new academic field, a new profession, and a new calling, all born of an ancient impulse to use our arts to make sense of our lives. Transformative Language Arts (www.goddard.edu/masters_transformative) began as a Master's degree at Goddard College in 2000, but it's far more expansive in practice, encompassing the research of James Pennebaker; writing as practice books by the likes of Natalie Goldberg, Pat Schneider, Anne Lamott, Deena Metzger and Sharon Bray; the popularity of memoirs and other life stories; and many classes and workshops on writing, storytelling, theatre and more for personal growth, spiritual quest, community building, and social change.

In helping found TLA, I didn't yet know how writing would continue to save my life after I was diagnosed with stage II breast cancer, and lead me to facilitate writing workshops with people living with serious illness. Now, as I celebrate my own survivor anniversaries and lead workshops for other survivors and their caregivers, I've realized how TLA can help survivors meet the "new normal" of our lives by writing to reclaim and rename our own beauty.

RECLAIMING AND RENAMING OUR BEAUTY

One of the most radical things we can do is to stop despising and denying our physical shapes and forms. As much as we are frightened of ugliness, we are also terrified of our radiance. What does it mean to accept and appreciate our looks, our faces and bodies, when we are ill, as we age? Are we able to cultivate a relationship with ourselves claiming what we know from the inside? Although it may seem self-centered, it is much less selfish than the obsessive preoccupation with our flaws. – Ruth Gendler, writer and artist

When the landscape of our body changes due to cancer, we often need to come to new terms of what it means to inhabit this new body. As someone who lost both her breasts, not to mention a heap of body parts that changed my childbearing-years body to a post-menopausal one, I've needed to walk that pathless path beyond my old definitions and imprints of what a woman looks like. I've also witnessed many other survivors needing to write of new and more authentic ways of being beautiful and finding beauty within and without.

I turn to John Keats definition of beauty at the end of "Ode to a Grecian Urn," when he writes, "Beauty is truth, truth, beauty/ That is all ye need to know, and all ye know on earth." To me, this quote illuminates how the life force itself that flows through each of

our bodies – truth is one way of naming it – is beauty, and so whenever we can speak with our own voice to tell our own truth, we are engaging in an act of beauty. Linda Garrett, a writer living with late stage ovarian cancer in one of my cancer writing workshops, explains how the truth, as I write in the poem below, may not always be pretty:

But this is how TLA writing works. The smelly and the hidden (or occasionally the pleasant and the lovely) tumble out into the light of day. Fearful emotions that may have been suppressed and discouraged can find their way to the page, and then are read out loud to others in the group. Witnessed in this way, the writings are embraced by their authors and become undeniable truths. They become real. ...the writer must remain open to all the possibilities within, for any of them may become her truth at a given moment.

What Linda writes points also to finding the truth – and according to Keats (and me) – the beauty of not just any given moment, but of who we are at any given moment.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

Here are some exercises to try out on your own, but before you write, please remember some simple ground rules

1. Don't worry about spelling, grammar or making sense.
2. Follow your writing – go where it leads you even if it turns out you're not following the exercise.
3. Don't judge what you're writing as you're writing it.
4. Pay attention to what energizes or thrills or brings other strong emotion to you as you write, and follow closely.

And now some writing prompts:

- ❖ The term “Wabi-Sabi” is a Japanese term that points to the beauty in impermanence. “Wabi-sabi is underplayed and modest, the kind of quiet, undeclared beauty that waits patiently to be discovered,” writes architect Tado Ando. Write about your wabi-sabi body, the “quiet, undeclared beauty that waits to patiently to be discovered.”
- ❖ Write about the ugliness in something we see as beautiful, or write about the beauty in something you see as ugly.
- ❖ Describe the beauty of one of your own or one of your beloved's body parts.
- ❖ Write a letter to yourself praising your beauty from the point-of-view of the one (real or imaginary) who loves you best and sees the best in you.
- ❖ Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, writes, “In nature, nothing is perfect and everything is perfect. Trees can be contorted, bent in weird ways, and they're still beautiful.” Write about your body as a part of nature, a tree that may be bent or curved in new ways, but is still beautiful.
- ❖ Visit the Real Women Project (www.realwomenproject.org), which follows the creed, “Imagine a world radiantly lit by the true beauty and wisdom of women in

pursuit of health and justice for all,” and then go to their page of “poems, songs and stories” or “sculptures,” and then use something that grabs your eye and your heart as a prompt to write about the beauty of the real woman you are.

The following poem is one I wrote, using a prompt I found on the Real Women Project website (www.realwomenproject.org). After reading River Malcolm’s poem “Every Woman Deserves a Poem” (http://.realwomenproject.org/poems/every_woman.shtml), I took the first line and followed into my own poem.

I Want to Tell You How Beautiful You Are

I want to tell you how beautiful you are
with your flat chest soaring
into scar across your heart and lungs.
I want to tell you even this is beautiful,
and even the rounded flesh below, the silhouette
hollowed here, extended there, the shapes new
and sudden, the beauty you could never see
when they cut your body open to where
the breathing organs breathe, the beauty
you'll mourn from the other side of your life.

I want to tell you, believe this now,
stop doubting that because it's not
what you wanted, what you expected,
it's not beauty. It is

just like weather you didn't expect,
just like ground cut back to hold more
perennials and wider swatches of
the wildest grasses.

It may not be pretty but I want you
to finally believe, now on the far side of girlhood,
past growing and giving birth to three children,

and now while you can still open and hold him,
his hands praising your re-grown hair
and flat new chest
that you are, beyond belief
and inside it too,
beautiful.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Ph.D. founded Transformative Language Arts (www.goddard.edu), an MA program focusing on social and personal transformation through the written, spoken and sung word, where she teaches. She is the author of three

collections of poetry, including *Reading the Body* (Mammoth Publications, www.writewhereyouare.org), which includes “I Want To Tell You How Beautiful You Are” and other poetry about surviving breast cancer. Her other poetry collections are *Lot’s Wife* and *Animals in the House* (both published by Woodley Press, www.writewhereyouare.org). Caryn co-edited *The Power of Words: A Transformative Language Arts Reader* (TLA Press, www.TLANetwork.org) and wrote *Write Where You Are* (www.amazon.com), a guide for teens (and the young at heart). She facilitates writing workshops for many populations, but especially for people living with serious illness. Please see her website, www.writewhereyouare.org; her website with singer Kelley Hunt, www.bravevoice.com, about their writing and singing workshops; and her blog, www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.blogspot.com.

Excerpt from Ruth Gendler’s *Notes on the Need for Beauty: An Intimate Look at An Essential Quality*. New York: De Capo Press, 2007.

Quote from Noble Harbor, “What is Wabi-Sabi?”
<http://nobleharbor.com/tea/chado/WhatIsWabi-Sabi.htm>

“I Want To Tell You How Beautiful You Are,” published in *Reading the Body*, Lawrence, KS.: Mammoth Publications, 2004.

Excerpt from Linda Garrett, published in *The Power of Words: A Transformative Language Arts Reader*, co-edited by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg and Janet Tallman, Keene, MA.: TLA Press, 2007.