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March 2023

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Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "A Conversation on Right Livelihood and Transformative Language Arts with Laura Packer and Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg" (2023). *Essays*. 41.
https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_essays/41

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A Conversation on Right Livelihood and Transformative Language Arts with Laura Packer and Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

What does Right Livelihood mean in the context of TLA? How does it relate to finding and keeping in conversation with our life's work while keeping the cupboards full and gas tank full as well as caring for our health, art, soul, and community?

Laura Packer and Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, between them, have decades of experience.

Laura has been supporting herself as a storyteller, writer, consultant and coach for over ten years. While her income isn't as consistent as it was when she had a day job, Laura finds her work to be fulfilling and meaningful which more than balances the occasional financial unpredictability. These days she travels around the world teaching, performing, coaching, giving talks, and helping people and organizations discover and find meaning in their own stories. Her writing ranges from ghost-writing for CEOs to lyrical essays about storytelling and life to the occasional piece of fiction or poetry. Laura is nourished and transformed by her work every day; she sometimes says her work is synonymous for living, because story is everywhere.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg has been balancing freelance workshops, consulting, presentations, and collaborative projects with her own writing and teaching at academic institutions since 1986. She makes her living now from teaching in Goddard College's Graduate Institute and coordinating the TLA concentration, and driving her 2004 peanut-butter-cup-colored Honda CRV all over Kansas and nearby states to lead workshops, give readings and talks, and collaborate on projects. Threaded through all, she writes poetry, fiction, memoir, blog posts, and songs. Her work also encompasses long walks with her husband and dog, being present for and with loved ones, making things (from quilts to soups), and watching great movies.

Here is Caryn & Laura's conversation, which starts and continues each time they visit in person, but was caught here through a google doc over several months.

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg: When I was growing up, I had no idea how a poet would make a living, and although people pushed me toward journalism and advertising, it didn't stick. I was made to make things, especially out of words.

Now I make a living in ways that didn't even exist when I was a teenage poet: I teach in a low-residency master's program at Goddard College, traveling from Kansas to Vermont twice each year to work with students intensively in designing and implementing their individualized studies. facilitate community writing workshops for many populations, particularly for people living with serious illness; I love what happens when mortality is at the table, and we speak, listen and write from our souls. I give talks, workshops and readings through the Kansas Humanities Council and University of Kansas Osher Institute, and mostly on my own, conversing deeply with audiences on everything from poetry and wild weather, to oral histories of people who survived the Holocaust. My work is a kaleidoscope of gigs and teaching, mentoring and consulting, driving across the plains in the bright light of early spring and occasionally flying over the green wonder of the mountains surrounding Lake Champlain to land again in Vermont.

What is your work, Laura, and how did you find your way to it?

Laura Packer: While I was pursuing my degree in Folklore and Mythology I had a lot of people tell

me to practice saying, “Would you like fries with that?” I ignored them and persevered. Truthfully, I didn’t know what I was going to do with the degree, I just knew that I loved stories and that my work lay in that direction.

I met the man who would become my mentor when I was 19. He was telling stories and, as I listened, I knew that this was my path. It took me awhile to realize I would have to build the path myself. I worked part time for many years while I pursued my craft, but now I support myself doing a wide-range of things that all fall under the umbrella of *storytelling*. I perform around the world to a wide range of audiences. I’ve told stories in pre-school, at festivals, universities, homes and so on. I teach, running workshops and coaching people ranging from storytellers to CEOs to parents to marketers to non-profit professionals and more. I work with organizations, both for- and non-profit, helping them understand and refine the stories they tell. I give keynotes and lead workshops at conferences. And I write, blogging about storytelling and taking on freelance assignments from a wide variety of clients.

It’s never boring. It’s sometimes hard to keep track of. And I am always learning, hearing new stories and remembering that the work I do matters. Everything I do, as diverse as it is, touches upon story and the ways that our stories matter. I know that the work I do supports me both financially and spiritually. I also know that the work I do helps others. It is the right path and one it’s been fascinating to create.

Caryn, I’m wondering about the work you do with TLA and what that has to do with right livelihood. For that matter, could you explain what right livelihood means to you?

CMG: When I first heard about the term “right livelihood” -- at Goddard College during a session on making a living true to ourselves -- it chimed in me as something I had been seeking for myself and my community for a long time. After being thrown out of journalism school (the extremes we will go to so we can land in the right place!), I earned my BA in labor history, drawing on my concern since I was a teen about how our work lives infuse the whole of our lives. What we “do” colors not just our workaday life but how we perceive ourselves, our communities, our world, and our potential to change. If your work entails saying, “Would you like fries with that?” on regular basis, it’s likely being a fast-food worker shapes your identity, sense of self and what’s possible for you, and even your belief about what kind of work you’re entailed to do in your life.

Right livelihood is a Buddhist term, part of Buddha’s eightfold path (which also includes right speech, another TLA concept in my mind), and it connotes work that does no harm. Stretched out, the term points toward work (both vocation and avocation, for pay and just because it feels like our work) that serves, including conversing with our own calling as well as our community’s calling.

I didn’t realize when I was studying labor history, and later working as a labor organizer and reporter -- all the time writing and reading and breathing poetry -- that all would converge into my own right livelihood. As a transformative language artist, I draw on the power of our words aloud and on the page, solo and choral, to herd us toward greater health, vibrancy, liberation, and connection with the living world. My work -- both at Goddard as a faculty member and coordinator of TLA, and as a working artist facilitating brave spaces for others to find more of their own voice and vision -- is how I practice my right livelihood. All of this aligns me with the continual conversation with a calling, but it’s also work that, at best, helps others to articulate more of their own truest work in the world. In the Brave Voice writing and singing retreats I co-lead with singer-songwriter Kelley Hunt, we fly on the assumption that opening your voice in one way cannot help but to strengthen your voice in your whole life, and I’ve witnessed many people making courageous leaps into who they already were and what they now need to do.

Laura, is that how it is for you too as a performer, teacher, mentor, and writer as well as someone I would call a fellow transformative language artist?

LP: Caryn, you hit the nail right on the head. Right livelihood means work that enlivens and enriches us with thoroughly, from fiscal health to spiritual health and beyond.. It's work that nourishes our spirits as well as our bodies and allows us to function as contributing members of a larger community, which is what artists are.

When I remember the value of my work in that larger picture, as someone who brings something powerful to a community as well as enriching my own life, it's easier for me to be able to charge appropriately, advocate for myself and remember that what I do, as well as all other artists, matters.

CMG: Absolutely! I think part of this work, to really put the "right" into "right livelihood," entails making paths for and sometimes with other artists. Little makes me as happy as seeing someone I helped mentor come out with a first book or start giving writing workshops in their communities.

Laura, you've talked with me before about the importance of charging what we're worth as a way to honor those who come after us. The whole issue of what to charge, and how to ask for what our work is worth, is challenging and variable for me. I'll do some things for hardly anything or for free, and other things for a livable stipend, yet negotiations can encompass lots of gray areas. I find our system of working this out to be awkward: an organization will often not say what it can afford until I suggest an amount. I often present what I charge as a range from the lowest I'm willing to accept to the highest I believe I should be paid, and if it's something I really feel is mine to do, I try to convey that I'm open to negotiation.

Of course, all these issues speak to our cultural tendency to soil our money relationship with shame, privilege, hurt, defensiveness and other difficult guests to host. I've had a lot of help along the way to ask for what my work is worth, even and especially as a poet. Once a representative of an organization I was working with told me, a few hours before my gig there, that they didn't have enough in the budget to pay me what we agreed on, so would I take a cut in pay? The musician I was collaborating with wasn't asked to take a cut, so we talked this over, and together told the organization, "no," but it was eye-opening for me, re-affirming my bias against myself that poets don't get paid or paid much. Having someone stand tall with me helped me to challenge my self- and poet-destructive thinking, and hopefully, as time goes on, may have some effect for others too.

How do you navigate all this?

LP: Oh, this is a hard one! I feel like I don't navigate it well much of the time, but I do the best I can, which is all any of us can do. Money is such a taboo subject, I try to understand my own prejudices and fears as well as talk about it, so it becomes less taboo. I use several tools to help me think and talk about money.

First, I talk with my colleagues about what they charge. If we remove some of the secrecy, we can all charge a living wage AND put a dent in the cultural idea that transformative language art should be cheap and that those who hire us should pay us less than they would their caterer, organizer, musician or others. It's related to your experience with being asked to take a pay cut when your musician friend was not; if we charge a reasonable amount and know that we aren't pricing ourselves out of range of our colleagues but in alliance with them, it can be easier to ask for. Additionally, by talking about it with my colleagues we get to remind ourselves that we are charging for far more than the 30 or 60 minute event, but for all of the time and experience that lies behind it.

Second, I do what you do. I often give the representative a range of cost and then remind them that this is how I make their living. I also tell them that I am open to negotiation (if I am).

Third, if I give work away for free or at a greatly reduced cost, I always give an invoice that

reflects what I would have wanted to be paid. This helps lay groundwork that what I and other TLA artists do is valuable and worth paying for.

Fourth and last, I remember what a wise friend said to me, when I asked him money questions. He told me, “You can always negotiate down, you can’t negotiate up. Think about what you want and then ask for double.” I don’t do it quite this way (asking for double feel too bold for me) but I do ask for what I want and a little more. I can lower my rate, shorten the event, barter for other services but once I’ve set a price I can’t really come back and ask for more unless they ask for more service first. When I remember to financially value my own work I am not only telling myself that what I do is worthwhile, I am also telling the rest of the world that art matters.

CMG: That’s very wise advice, and I love the idea of the invoice for what this is worth. There’s something magical about saying on paper “this is what my work is worth” when it comes to inviting in more lucrative work to balance out what we feel drawn to give away.

I’ve been thinking of what I do for free lately because in the last few months. I have one project that I’m grappling with because it’s sort of a “closure” project with a group of people, a way to share some social capital after working with this group for many years in the past. In the long run, I know this project is what I should be doing, but it’s sometimes difficult to balance the volunteer work with the paid work and still have time (not!) to write.

I’ve also been editing a book for a wonderful poet in his dying days, and that’s a sweetheart labor of love through and through. It’s an immersion in grace to be able to do this for someone I love and whose poetry is so important to share with others who can find a lot of sustenance in what he has to say about death, dying and life.

Often though, it’s hard for me to know the impact of my work and if I’m making the best decisions about where to put my time. My husband, also a writer and grassroots organizer, and I often joke as we’re falling asleep that we won’t know the impact of our work until after we’re dead, and I think that’s true. We don’t know, and this makes think of a stanza in one of my favorite Rumi poems:

If you are here unfaithfully with us,
you’re causing terrible damage.
If you’ve opened your loving to God’s love,
you’re helping people you don’t know
and have never seen.

So maybe all we can do is to try to be faithful in being here with our people, which also means being faithful to ourselves, and through our work and being, open our hearts (whether we use phrase like “God’s love” or not in describing this) to dropping our pebble in the pond and hoping for the best for what ripples we make and receive.

How have you learned and how are you learning how to do your best Right Livelihood?

LP: Most of what I’ve learned about right livelihood has come from trying things, seeing what works, and talking honestly with my colleagues. We build community by have frank conversations about value, issues and solutions, about how to support each other, not undercut each other and still get work.

I love your idea of being faithful to ourselves and our work. When we are open hearted in our approach we are at once more vulnerable and more reachable. I think vulnerability is too often seen as a weakness in the working world. When we are vulnerable we let others know they can be vulnerable too. I have found I am no more likely to be hurt or not get work when I am honest.

If I model that for everyone with whom I interact then they may be a bit more vulnerable too.

We can connect more effectively. We help others without even knowing it.

CMG: I also think of those I owe homage to for what they taught me and are teaching me about Right Livelihood. One of my close friends, Kris Hermanson, is a wiz at organizational development and consulting, and I've learned a great deal from her about how to write and share strong proposals, grants, pitches to those who might want to bring me on-board. Plus, we both work at home or in coffee houses, so we check in with each other often, helping each other talk through questions and dilemmas, quandaries and decisions, such as how to deal with people along the way. Mostly, though, it's how to navigate projects with people who have great intentions, but limited budgets and experience, and how can we make this a learning experience in the best way that really serves the community.

Another mentor is also a close friend, Kelley Hunt, who has been a touring musician for decades. We've had infinite conversations on the nuts and bolts of freelance work, including deeply pondering whether to say yes or no, what to charge, how to take care of ourselves during big push times when there's too many gigs at once, and we have our own business together, Brave Voice, which lands us in the center of thousands of spinning details and bits of magic when there's a retreat or performance afoot.

I'm also very lucky to have a great partner in life, my husband, Ken, who I can puzzle through various predicaments with, and who has great sense in seeing ways through the bramble to lift up everyone involved. He's a Midwesterner to my east coast Jewish background, so he's less apt to escalate and more seasoned in taking a breath and finding the wide-sky perspective on how to proceed.

One of my big tripping points is forgiving myself when I overschedule and overcommit. I tend to first go to the, "Oh, you did it again! What is wrong with you?" Place. My people help me let go of the shame and accept that making mistakes is part of this work. I also find conversations with you, Laura, to be immensely helpful in the "what is enough?", and "what is too much?" as well as about the whole Right Livelihood quest.

Who are your guides and mentors, Laura?

LP: Thank you Caryn! Likewise, I find talking with you to be immensely helpful. Your honesty and willingness to talk about difficult topics with vulnerability help remind me that I am not alone. Your insight is invaluable.

I have a number of what I call *accountability buddies* who help me set and keep goals. They also help me forgive myself when I overreach and remind me to take time for self-care. Two of those buddies in particular, Mark Binder and Cameryn Moore, help me with getting things done on time and prioritizing. Mark also helps me think through some of the financial issues of our work. My friends Elsa Zuniga and Trish Berrong help me think strategically and remind me that I can't do everything. And friends like Priscilla Howe and Christie Keegan help me work through various artistic projects.

I think it's easy to get caught up in the idea of the lone writer, scribbling away in her garret. It's part of the cultural story about artists and it's compounded by the American story of the lone hero. Neither of those stories really work for me. We need help, no one can do everything alone. We need people we can rely on to keep us on track, to remind us that what we do matters and to help us be kind to ourselves in meaningful ways. Most of the time people are honored when you ask for help. It's worth the risk. I know I couldn't do what I do alone. For all that the actual acts of creation take place alone all of the sustaining work is made easier by having allies.

CMG: You teach a class for the TLA Network on "Creating a Sustainable Story: Self-Care, Meaningful Work and the Business of Creativity." Could you say more about what "a sustainable story" means to you?

LP: We understand our lives through story. We tell ourselves stories about who we are, how we got that way, our roles in the world and the work we do. It can be easy to tell ourselves stories that are destructive or impossible to achieve. Stories like, “I will never be good enough for my parents,” or “I will succeed at my work only when I win award x or am published in the New Yorker,” or “I am a struggling artist.”

If we can identify the stories we are telling them we understand more about why we do what we do. If we tell ourselves empowering stories that can be sustained long term then it’s more likely we will have a positive impact in the world and be able to measure our success in realistic ways. For example, contrast the story *I am a writer who struggles to be published because no one understands me* with the story *I am a writer who continues to seek out receptive audiences*. Those two stories may be about similar experiences but one offers more hope than the other.

A sustainable story is one that has room for varied definitions of success and empowers us to continue to do what we love. It nourishes us because it is a story of value, worth and flexibility. There is room to be driven and room to take a break. A sustainable story is one we can engage in long-term, not just until the first roadblock.

It’s not a story of the lone hero who never errs, but of the human being who is supported, who can accept help and who succeeds in achievable steps. It’s about understanding that pulling the sword from the stone (finding purpose) is only the first step and that there are many detours along the way. Some of those detours may become the main story instead. By understanding the story we are telling ourselves about ourselves and including allies and self-care, we are more able to keep going when things are tough. We are less likely to brand ourselves failures, but to give ourselves permission to fall down, get up and try again.

How do you keep going when you stumble? What tools do you use? What stories do you rely on?

CMG: I stumble often although it’s not always visible to people outside of my own mind because I am good at sucking it up and putting myself out there, even when I feel like shit, which is what the stumbling is often about. For better or worse, and especially since surviving cancer in 2002, I tend to get sick often. Because I love my work so much and have a hard time self-regulating or even knowing what not to do so that I have enough space and time for optimum health, I’ve become a reluctant student of self-care.

My old story was more along the lines of “You can never try hard enough,” and obviously, that’s a dangerous story when it comes to allowing the spaciousness needed for self-care and even self-love, let alone living a creative life. Yet I’ve always had a conflicting story that’s the underground well for my poetry and other writing, and it has to do with loving the life force as it unfolds in the sky, land and moments of real love between humans and the more-than-human world. This story requires stopping, listening and watching, opening my senses and heart and letting myself be more vulnerable and permeable.

“This is enough” echoes me through a lot now even when I have a pile of work on my computer screen. I tend to focus in on the next paragraph, next conversation and next email more than driving myself crazy with the whole of everything at once. I also try to remind myself that this moment -- like right now when I’m writing, the brown dog is stretched out on the blue couch, a blue jay is hopping on the railing of the deck out the window, and I’m sipping tea -- is as rich with the potential for loving life as any moment.

This is central to self-care, which feels like a part-time job that goes full-time as we age. When you’re working in the ways we are, it can be especially challenging because we often face feast-and-famine times (and income). I struggle to find and keep the best self-care for myself, which tend to

include not eating so much sugar and doing a lot more yoga, swimming, walking, dancing and other ways of moving this body. But self-care can also manifest as going to a movie in the middle of the day, taking a bath (or, on a bad day, several), planting more hosta plants in a shady spot although the last ones I planted died, sitting in the corner with a magazine and cup of tea, making a luscious stir-fry, staring into the eyes of my dog, talking with my husband and friends, surfing Netflix, and taking one deep breath while watching the leaves unfurl on Cottonwood Mel, the big tree in my backyard that I named in memory of my father.

How do you see self-care, and how does it evolve, change, surprise you, and unfold in your life?

LP: It changes every day and is probably my biggest struggle. I often feel guilty about taking time for self-care, feeling instead as if I'm being lazy or avoiding the work. I also struggle to get back on track when I've been derailed by circumstances beyond my control. I frequently need to remind myself that when I'm depleted my work will suffer. If my work suffers then I am less able to help others. So taking time for myself is really a way to help others. Sometimes that's the only way I can stop for a little while, by reminding myself that it's not just for me.

Self-care for me can be reading a novel I've read before, one that isn't particularly challenging. It can be going for a walk or moving my body in some other way. I recently hired a personal trainer to help me take better care of my body. I'm reminding myself that my mind and body are inextricably linked, so this is an investment in my work.

I get listened to. That's a big source of self-care for me. I find a friend who I know won't judge me and just whine for a little bit. Airing the self-pity helps me see how petty and insubstantial it is.

I take baths, I spend time with trees and rivers and (when I'm near it) the ocean. Sometimes I go to movies. I cook delicious, nourishing food.

I also try to set reasonable goals as a form of self-care. By breaking the big goals down into smaller parts I am giving myself tasks I can succeed at and I find success breeds success. That feels like self-care to me because I get to feel good about what I'm doing.

Self-care is constantly evolving. Paying attention to what is helpful at any given time takes work but is worth it. When I am well cared for it becomes easier to care for others through my actions and my work.

Lastly, when we care for ourselves it is easier to care for others. When we love ourselves we love the world more easily. And really, that's what we do as TL artists. We love the world into seeing itself more clearly.

CMG: I love what you say about how when we're well-cared for, we can better take care of others: an ethic of care, and really, of love for ourselves, our work, our people and place that fosters sustainability in how we and others live. I've been thinking lately about the term "social sustainability," which also speaks to me of what we've been exploring in the bioregional movement for decades: how can we make and hold space to sustain our community and support each person's unfolding conversation with what work and life calls to us?

Related to this for me has always been making things and ritual, which seem often like the same thing to me. There's a kind of ceremony involved in surrendering my will to writing, designing a quilt, and especially working with groups to listen for and support the group's collective heart and intelligence. I've been involved in many rituals that also bring in the arts, such as the water circle we do at the end of Kansas Area Watershed Council gatherings in which each person can step into the center, tell a story, say a poem, make a gesture, sing a song, and pour water from their home or travels.

TLA involves bringing together people to make greater meaning and unearth greater vitality in how we live. It helps us find -- through our words, images, rhythms -- our work in this life. Mary

Oliver said in one of her poems, “My work is loving the world,” and I feel the same. What I actually do for a living and beyond is just a form of that ritual: practicing how to love the world.