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Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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## The Imaginary Friend of the Page: Writing as a Transformative Practice

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Ph.D.

*I wait for you your whole life,  
not something you made up,  
but air against air, light against light  
draped over your shoulders  
like a sweater of no weight.*

“Imaginary Friend” by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

When I was a child, I didn't have any human friends. It wasn't that I didn't want friends; I just didn't understand how to get them. Hard-wired for interior sound from the get-go and growing up in a tumultuous home, I found imaginary friends for each day of the week. Monday was an older sister, reserved and confident. Tuesday had straight blond hair and a penance for dolls. Wednesday and I were thick as thieves, and she understood me best. Thursday was a standoffish brother, Friday a party animal, Saturday a patient and exhausted mother, and Sunday, a distracted father.

When I grew older, drawing took the place of imaginary friends. The images I made on paper kept me company, told me someone else was there – a tree coming into form, a snake swallowing its long tail, a face of a woman I didn't know. Eventually, images weren't enough.

I started writing like a maniac when I was fourteen, sitting on cements steps outside of what was called a “garden apartment” on a hot July afternoon in New Jersey. My best friend and her mother, who was dating my still-married father, were due any minute. At home, in the middle of their divorce, my father barricaded himself in the master bedroom, while my mother slept in a guest room. Battles encompassed raiding bank accounts, poisoning plants, and putting the kids, especially the oldest – me, on the front lines.

In that air, heavy with humidity, just-cut grass and a dying rose bush, I wrote a poem, not surprisingly, about the cruelty of people and hopelessness of life. Something must have shifted in me during the writing, however, because I returned to the page the next day, and the next. Writing became

my language of survival, how I spoke to myself in a voice I didn't hear anywhere else, edged with compassion and hope. I asked if God was there, and I heard back “yes” in each line. I asked what to do, what I felt under all my numbness, why Mike liked Denise more than me, and when my father would stop yelling and my mother crying?

The night my father dropped me off at our suburban house, threatening to kill himself, all I had was my journal. The afternoon my mother told me I was a bad daughter for siding with my father, I wrote. When our relatives took sides, I turned to poetry. It wasn't that writing gave me answers so much as it gave me a place to ask questions, and to feel, simply in the asking, held.

During the long year of the divorce, I told myself repeatedly that what was happening would make a great novel. Because of writing, I had close-up and panoramic vision at once. “Remember this scene,” I told myself during the courtroom fights and other moments of high drama, which were plentiful.

In the year after my mother and siblings moved out, my father's girlfriend broke up with him and my best friend with me, and I found myself thrust into the role of a daughter-wife – now responsible for cooking, cleaning, laundry and entertaining my younger siblings on the one night a week we saw them. Many steaks burned, and dress shirts mildewed in the washer because I was more concerned with getting a line in a poem right than pleasing my un-pleasable father who transferred his screaming and throwing of dishes from my mother to me. Depressed, exhausted and more alone than I imagined anyone could be, I survived because I wrote. If life was as interesting and satisfying as writing, I might as well stay around to see what would happen, I told myself.

Writing was how I came to sit face and face with my soul, and ask, “What's up?” It was my spiritual companion, a sidekick who tapped me on the shoulder, rolled her eyes and said, “Yeah, this does suck, but think of what material this is for our writing,” or held me as I fell asleep at night, an invisible friend who showed me who I really was: a writer.

Fast forward twenty later, and I'm sitting across a table from a 15-year-old girl, hurting and scared like I was at her age. She sits at a long table in the basement of a social service agency in rural Kansas, flicks her blond hair out of her steely eyes, and reads, "My mother never wanted me, no one did except God, and even God didn't like me...." She halts, shuts her eyes tight, tries not to cry. An 84-year-old woman beside her with a helmet of tight white curls and a lavender blouse, puts her arm around the girl and cooes, "Now, honey." The girl leans into the woman and cries full throttle.

This moment is part of an eight-month series of workshops I facilitate, organized by a state intergenerational organization, that brings together at-risk girls to write with retirement community widows. The town's notorious "bad girls," who have been arrested for drugs, drinking or truancy, have largely lost their mothers to drugs, drinking or dangerous men. I've been facilitating this writing workshops for eight months, and this is our final reading together. I've seen moments I could never have imagined, catalyzed by the power of writing, witnessing one another's words, and making enduring community together. At the retirement community conference room where we often met, it was common to see a girl in an old woman's lap, both of them laughing. The girls suffer from mother hunger, and almost every woman here yearns to give her love – the legacy of her years of homemaking and parenting – to someone who wants it.

How I got here comes from my own writing, which has continued to open its wings through me, and not just through my own journeys in a journal. From a college degree in history, where I landed after a disastrous tumble through a journalism program that didn't fit my need to be in the stories I wrote, I worked for five years as a political organizer, the impulse in me to change the world a little stronger in my twenties than the hunger to write. But that hunger wasn't satisfied by crafting newsletters, fundraising letters and press releases, and by time I married my husband at age 25, I was ready to return to a full-time marriage with my writing also. So I did what many writers seeking harbor do: I went to graduate school, pausing along the way to go into labor, nurse children (even while balancing one baby on my lap while I typed revisions into my dissertation), and immersed myself in

thousands of pages of poetry, stories, novels and plays.

By the time my daughter was born in 1992, I had begun to offer community writing workshops after many years of teaching at the local university as both a way to support myself through grad school and to subvert Basic Comp into writing for self-discovery workshops. Longing to reach people beyond the university, I offered a workshop called “Write For Your Life,” figuring people would come to learn about writing, but instead, they want to write toward softening the hard skin of their wounds, opening the locked gates to where and when they knew freedom, and coming home to themselves – all the same reasons I write. Realizing this, I do one of the smartest things of my life: I followed my students, learning from them the importance of opening the doors and windows of our lives to write of our yearnings and fears as well as the moments when time stopped and how it started again.

From this first workshop, I walk through many doors and crawled out many windows myself, leading workshops throughout the community. I hang out in classrooms and community centers, and eventually, when I begin teaching mostly through intensive letter-writing in a low-residency master's program at Goddard College, at coffee shops, headphones on, and fingers firmly on the laptop, writing quickly for myself or to my students. On a daily basis, I experience words as lanterns to help us see and change our lives.

One such place full of lanterns is in a local housing authority's conference room, where, for eight years, I facilitate writing for low income women at a local housing authority. Native American, African-American, white and Latino women sit around the table, eating the lasagne dinner the housing authority supplies for them. Their children are in the childcare open for this weekly meeting, and their minds are on the song, “Waking Up Slow” by Kelley Hunt, which I just played for them before asking them what they're waking up slow to.

One woman, who has spent years in and out of mental institutions, pours all her considerable attention into filling her journal page. Another woman with a stunningly gorgeous round face writes slowly, but steadily, stopping every so often to ask me what she should write about. “Whatever you

want,” I tell her, and knowing her life revolves around God, I suggest her faith. She smiles broadly, shows her missing teeth and half-hugs me, then goes back to the paper. In ten minutes, when I call them together, they stop slowly, arriving at the station of our group and read their work, one at a time, with considerable attention.

Melanie Jones, a Navajo woman with four children who decided to go back to college because of this workshop, writes:

I am waking up slowly  
to a molded work of beauty,  
a woman’s reflection bold and strong  
just simply courageous  
and stunningly outrageous.

Again, my students mirror for me the outrageous turns in life and the courageous responses such curves demand of us. When I get diagnosed with breast cancer, I begin leading workshops for people living with serious illness and their caregivers. In a hospital basement, office conference room, or living room at a retreat center, I lead groups focused on sharing what it really is to know how mortal we are. After reading a William Stafford poem with the line, “You were never alone,” Julie Cowdin, a young woman facing metastacized breast cancer writes,

I am never alone.  
You heard the words, “You have cancer” before I did.  
I am never alone  
You were afraid before I was.  
I am never alone.  
You cried rivers before I did.  
I am never alone.

You once had poison running through your veins.

I am never alone.

You were bald once too.

I am never alone.

You've had the same surgeries.

I am never alone.

You tried to soothe your burning flesh.

I am never alone.

You were beautiful, gracious, living survivors before I was.

I lead groups of Latino men, women in transition, men in my living room, teens at a Western Kansas high school, and children who can't yet write so we compose poems aloud. I facilitate a writing from the earth workshop under a large tent in North Carolina as part of the Continental Bioregional Congress, where a Palestinian man weeps about his homeland, and a Jewish woman comforts him. In a high-rise Minneapolis hotel, I tell women in floral dresses how to draw on Rumi's writing to find just one of the thousand ways to bow and kiss and ground. With non-traditional students in a Vermont cottage on the campus of Goddard College, where I teach, I invite people to sit up from lying in corpse pose in our writing and yoga workshop and now write about what the rain, pouring outside, is telling us.

In each workshop, I see miracles: how simply witnessing each other makes a welcome space for spirit to rise up.

As we get older, if we're brave enough to listen to our life's callings, we often find that all we've done, been and known wants to entwine together. In my 40s, my work as a writer, teacher and facilitator, study of labor history and right livelihood, ecological political organizing, and life-long spiritual

yearnings to create as a form of prayer, came together in a stubborn impulse to start a college program on writing and healing at Goddard College, where I've taught since 1996.

After first floating the idea to the college community in 1998, I discovered that what was needed was larger than just “writing” or “healing.” It included the spoken word – storytelling, theater and other performance art – and all manner of words aloud and on the page to make community together, find individual and collective healing and health, transform injustice and oppression, and follow spiritual pathways through the wild lands of our souls.

Transformative Language Arts launched at Goddard College in 2000 with five students, and now has over 50 graduates, such as Brian Moore in Portland, Oregon who started an ecological writing center to help people connect their lives to the earth around them more. Using what he calls “the curiosity model,” which encourages people to bring open eyes to whatever they write, he has developed writing workshops upholding the creativity in everyone and the divine in nature.

Nancy Morgan, who serves as Arts and Humanities Director at the Lombardi Cancer Center in Washington, D.C. walks through cancer wards, handing journals and writing exercises to patients, holds sessions for families to write and tell stories together, meets with chaplains to sing for an hour and replenish themselves with the sung word, and even holds totem-making workshops for oncologists to help them relax and renew themselves.

Meanwhile, other TLA graduates forge their own pathways. Jeanne Chambers in the Atlanta, Georgia area offers biographical services. She meets with people to gather their writing, photographs, and after many hours of interviewing them on all aspects of their lives, she creates heirloom books for them and their families, leaving the legacy of their stories for future generations. Minna Dubin, first in Lexington, Kentucky, and now in San Francisco, facilitates empowerment workshops through writing for teens; Richard Hodgson meets regularly with nursing home residents to help them write and tell their stories; Yvette Hyater-Adams, in New Jersey and beyond, offers transformative coaching services based on writing the new story of your life.



Being the vessel for TLA to come into existence has been as wild a ride as any spiritual endeavor. I often wondered what I was doing, if it made any sense, if anyone would respond, or if it would all die down to cold embers. My work entailed creating an academic program that didn't exist anywhere else while also trying to get the word out without much of a marketing budget and while attending to hundreds of swirling details involved in the conference, student practicums, handbooks and web copy, and students I worked one-on-one with each semester to help them craft their studies. I tried to step in the right place, wait for the right timing, and move ahead even when I was afraid, which was often. Yet there were an equal number of saving moments to counter all the doubting ones: the voice on the phone, saying that TLA was the first time she was able to explain her life to herself, the email about similar work in Australia, the prospective students who would nod immediately when I began to explain TLA. These messages landed on me like an old friend touching my shoulder, and telling me I was on the right path.

I also started to realize how much I had put creating, teaching, organizing and other endeavors, not to mention marriage and three children, above caring for this body, which was increasingly suffering from mysterious ailments. I ignored my problems and pushed my body onward. Eventually, having lived with undiagnosible flu-like symptoms for three years since my cancer treatment, three major surgeries and six months of intensive chemotherapy were over, I found myself on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of a Boston hotel with crippling insomnia, headaches, a wound on my foot that wouldn't heal, gastric issues and other ailments du jour. I heard a voice again: "If you want to heal your life, change your life."

Birthing TLA and living as a writer had imprinted on me the importance of following such voices. I began a drastic scaling-back of all my commitments and learning the art of self-care beyond the page and the work I loved. I began slowly with enough rest and exercise, finding that I loved being in motion. Along the way, I found one of the great surprises of my life: yoga, which is intensely difficult and peaceful at once for me. Writing has been a constant in helping me hear myself think; yoga

is now a constant in hearing myself feel, which cannot help but spill out into the rest of my life – making me suffer fools a bit more gladly, take more time to respond, sleep more deeply, and listen to my intuitions more seriously. It's also brought to my writing a new way to inhabit language – to dwell more deeply in the place where I step off the ledge, relax, and see what happens.

Each time I begin a new poem, essay or novel, the first thing I think is, “I don't know how to do this.” I feel the same way with the first downward facing dog of the day. Yet I love that feeling, that newness, that sense of being so alive that all my cells are thrilled, scared, happy and ready to witness what the page and body says. Writing is my first spiritual practice, yoga my second, and both ways to make the invisible visible.

As a child, I asked each day of the week, then the blank page, to be my friend and show me how to engage with the life of this world. I'm still asking, living the words each time the page answers, “Yes, I'm here. Always.”

*Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, Ph.D., is the 2009-2011 Poet Laureate of Kansas; founder of Transformative Language Arts at Goddard College, where she teaches; a beloved teacher and workshop facilitator; and the author of ten books. Her publications include four collections of poetry, Landed, Animals in the House, Reading the Body and Lot's Wife; a writing guide, Write Where You Are; a memoir on cancer, community and coming home to the body, The Sky Begins At Your Feet; and she served as editor of several anthologies, and as co-editor of The Power of Words: A Transformative Language Arts Anthology. She also has been deeply active in the bioregional movement since the early 1980s. In 2003, she founded the Power of Words conference at Goddard College, which brings together writers, storytellers, performers, musicians, community leaders, healers, health professionals and activists to develop the field of TLA. She also worked with others to found the TLA Network, a not-for-profit dedicated to right livelihood and networking to grow TLA as a field, profession and calling. [www.TLANetwork.org](http://www.TLANetwork.org), [www.Goddard.edu](http://www.Goddard.edu), [www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.com](http://www.CarynMirriamGoldberg.com)*