

INTRODUCTION

Paper Stranger

Where would you like a “Stranger/Reader” to meet you, if you had to choose any Page One Moment out of all of the times in your life? If you had only a few minutes in which to plunge a sleepy or preoccupied reader into a scene that would cause her to drop her own daydreams, how would you seduce her into traveling with you, never knowing where you might take her on the page?

These are the questions I asked on a day in late March of 1996, when I found myself surrounded by a group of women who mostly had never written before, never dreaming how the dare to transform one’s most personal story to reach out to the heart of a stranger would set me on a journey of over a decade in which nearly 2000 women would play-act the answers that would open into chapters of their lives. Nor could I have imagined that soon I would be driving 300 miles a week to facilitate workshops in labor halls, counseling centers and senior residences, while the words “Stranger/Reader” and “Imaginary Page One” would echo in Spanish and behind prison bars.



It all happened because I had offered a week of memoir-writing workshops free to any woman in the community who wished to write her story, following a conference that I had co-organized celebrating women breaking silences. Up until this time, when I had taught fiction and autobiographical writing in the relative safety of my home, I had assumed that there was a certain consistency people needed to count on as they were opening themselves up on the page. By the time I had second thoughts as to what it would mean to craft intimate materials in a situation where new strangers might come in at any moment, it was too late to take back my offer. The publicity was out and people were already signed up.

I decided to make the best of what I thought was a bad situation, telling myself that maybe it would work out. After all, wasn't that what we all did as writers when we took personal material and made choices about how to transform it, so that strangers could be moved by it?

"Dare yourself to imagine a reader who really doesn't want to know you," I had found myself saying to the women who kept coming into the room. "And yet part of her is just waiting for a chance to be invited in."

I had drawn a deep breath as new faces appeared just as someone was speaking of how she might frame a moment of violation or mourning or pleasure, too intimate for a listener who didn't already care. And yet, I had silently asked myself, what would happen if I made that very opening up into intimacy the centerpiece of what people were trying to craft?

In my previous teaching, certain admonitions had become almost rote. For example: "You cannot allow a character to die or make love on page two. For there is no way a reader can care enough at that point to either experience loss or to enjoy the happiness of a stranger, even if the stranger is, in the case of autobiography, the writer's own self."

This was a hard lesson in humility, especially for the beginning writer who felt that whatever was most important to herself, in her own life, should somehow immediately translate into a story that would be of interest to anyone encountering it.

"Being told stories that are too personal before you know the cast of characters is like looking at photographs of someone else's grandchildren, which is something you can only do if you already care about the grandparents. Caring about someone else's joys and pains in their details can only come gradually," I would say. "And yet, if you cannot find a way to create an immediate illusion of empathy on page one, the reader will not find the impetus to continue."

We would speak of the necessity of helping a reader to enter into the experience of another as if she or he were already inside that other, even though in the beginning of any written text, the reader knows nothing at all about the one who is wrestling for attention.

The more that my students were able to grasp certain basic principles in the creation of empathy, the more easily I found they were able to solve fairly complicated problems of narrative structure and voice. I wasn't prepared for the richness and complexity of the reactions to the mandate not to take reader-involvement for granted, when I began to work with groups that brought together survivors of severe trauma

with those who, because they had not experienced enough action in their lives, felt that they had no stories to tell.

There Is Power in Not Taking Caring for Granted

How delicate is the balance in our wanting and not wanting the stories of other people. How fragile is the thread of desire, as we in turn tell our stories to others. “Without acknowledging this, it would be an act of absolute arrogance to ask a reader to come into bed with our lovers or to whisper to our mothers,” I still hear my voice saying, as I look back on that long-ago March day.

As we set ourselves up before an audience that never asked us to confess, we must never cease to be humble before the very question of why another should be asked to enter into our sadness or smiles.

But of course we all wish this and want this—not necessarily from a Stranger/Reader, but from those closest to our hearts. It is, so very often, the lack of finding this with our close ones—and especially our first ones—that propels us into writing for an audience of strangers.

In the room where I sat, the “wanting their stories to be wanted” that had brought these women together was so palpable it was almost painful. The shyness, the uncertainty that anyone would want their stories, was equally palpable. Was it because once I had come from the place of deeply not wanting stories of pain that I would journey for more than a decade trying to help people bridge the gap between non-caring and caring? For inside me, so deeply in those first weeks, was the memory of myself as a young child, when I used to sit on my therapist mother’s lap listening to her intermingle her tales of the death of her mother and the violence of her father with the stories of her patients and the children of war, with me never knowing where one story ended and the other began, nor how large a story it would have to be to excite someone’s caring. In contrast, my own stories and even my mother’s had always seemed so small.



“For if I were to tell you, for example, that my mother had recently died, you would be stuck saying, ‘How terrible!’” I had found myself saying, as latecomers were pouring themselves coffee, hardly thinking of my mother or me. “But those words would be hollow. For you would have no history or meaning to hang your reaction upon.

“Yet let me tell you that on the day that she died, I had found myself thinking, ‘For the first time I can feel what I am feeling about

On the personal example

As I started to write this manual, I went back and forth about whether to include personal examples. And yet, so often when I teach, I find myself relying on them to bring out something particular in another, because they are easy and often come ready to hand.

The more that I teach, the more I am able to interweave examples from the writing journeys of my students, gradually dropping my own.

Here, I have decided to re-include them, to give permission to those of you who have never taught before to rely on your own stories to help others to shape theirs.

For I know that without the evocations, if you simply ask the question, "Where would you begin?" the answers will come out stilted and predictable.

I know that I will only get good results if I give so many examples that each and every participant will be surprised with an echoing call.

such an important thing as your death without having to share it with you,' you are immediately thrust miles beyond the anonymous blank page.

"If I were to show you a picture of my twin grandchildren, you would be roped into saying, 'How cute!' But again there is nothing more burdensome than having to look at a family photo album without bearings.

"Yet let me give you a scene in which my daughter and I are both sitting in a slightly darkened room with a tinier than tiny baby on each of our laps, with the sunlight coming in from just one window, dappling the children's pulsing fontanelles and their not-yet-sure-what-to-do-in-the-world premature fingers, reaching, small as bird bone, while the narrator smiles at the feeling of really enough baby to go around, of watching her daughter be a mother for the first time, even while she becomes a first-time grandmother, with no conflict but only ever, ever so surprising enough-ness. And you will forget you don't know me."



Is writing for the other? Is it for the self? Whose needs triumph, when we sit down in front of the blank page? Who drives it? Too often I had seen people cave in or become silent in trying to adjust either their voice or their sightings to satisfy what their audience seemed to want them to say. Too often I had seen people who had poured their hearts out writing all alone, shudder crestfallen when these outpourings didn't reach audiences of strangers.

Could some kind of compromise be affected by the notion of not the actual audience before us, but a deliberate construct of Imaginary Stranger/Readers who would embody the audience each writer wanted most to reach?

That March day, as I modeled examples of scenes that might fast-forward a reader into caring and scenes that would have to stand still, I kept asking the questions: "If you wanted me to find you, would the moment be seemingly quiet with something not yet visible bubbling under the calm? Or would the opening you choose be so fraught with drama that we the Stranger/Readers would have no choice but to get involved? Would you be a young child caught in an act the adult reader might understand better than yourself at that reinvented age? Would you be a later self, haunted by a scene of yourself seated on a bar stool in your communion dress, sliding bottles of beer down to a table full of men? Would you be a woman of an age yet untold, sitting

in front of a computer typing *widownet.com* and then being quickly led into *match.com*?”

Each time that I'd conjure a scene, I would follow it through just enough to demonstrate not one but at least three or four ways that it might unfold into a story, until watching the faces of the strangers who were sitting before me, I could tell they had consciously started to shape their own tales.

Personal Stories and Social Timing

I have always believed that the manner in which our personal timing intersects with the pulse beat of each era has a great deal to do with what we are able to create, as well as determining who will come along with us on the journey. It had been more than three decades since Tillie Olsen published the first portions of what would become her groundbreaking book, *Silences*, in *Harper's Magazine*.

Behind us were the experiences of the late sixties and early seventies, when so many of us were caught up in the heady struggle to break out of what Tillie Olsen described as “the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being and cannot,” where, “In the old, the obvious parallels: when the seed strikes stone; the soil will not sustain; the spring is false; the time is drought or infestation; the frost comes premature.”

A number of the writer friends I had invited to the conference that led up to those workshops had been instrumental in making sure that the stories of ordinary women and men would be taken seriously by the reading public. Gone were the days when sociologists, novelists, clinicians and historians told people's stories for them. First-person narratives with unknown names attached were treated with increasing respect. As for women, no longer would their writing about their own lives be relegated to the private journal or diary that once had been the sole outlet for all but a few.

But these new developments had little impact on those who were living in poverty, under the shield of violence, whose stories remained mostly silenced and unsung. For many who held stories inside them, educational deficiencies and lack of time and financial resources made it impossible to acquire the complex narrative skills that change one's own story, as told to a close friend or diary, or a court or a gathering of family, into something that might appeal to wider audiences.



The power of Tillie Olsen's images of unnatural thwarting and roots breaking through dry parched ground was still very much with me when I opened up the double doors to Southampton Cultural Center's Veteran's Halls, with its overstuffed chairs and glass cases of guns and helmets reminding us all of the work to be done to create a world of connectedness rather than violence. But beyond this, for me personally, it was less than a year after my mother had died pretty much all alone, despite her life's work as a therapist glorifying the power of self-expression.

While during my childhood, Mother's stories of her "wicked step-mother" and battering father had held me enthralled, with the passing of time they had become such an unbearable weight, I had no choice but to flee. Because her need to be met was so great, while a part of me struggled to be freed from each sentence, there was always another part waiting for those stories to morph into a shape that would reignite my desire. What hurt me the most was not my own reaction, but watching how others also were being driven away.

I would find myself thinking about the irony of her belief in healing through expression—which yet hadn't helped her to be heard—and then pondering whatever it is that allows certain people to tell their stories in ways that bring both strangers and intimates close, while the stories of others are either silenced before they begin or told in a manner that banishes the listener.

There was a certain quality of helplessness in my mother's way of telling, despite a bravery I would never cease to admire—but also a lack of boundaries, a lack of belief that the listener was truly other—that was simultaneously brave and inspiring and terrifyingly vulnerable and intrusive. One both wanted and dreaded her stories. One felt guilty for the part of the wanting that was voyeuristic. One felt guilty for the dread when the need to be touched was so extreme.

There was an overpowering violence coupled with an overpowering timidity, which I would come to see over and over again in the stories of students who hid behind the fantasy that if only they were loved enough, somehow, without their having to earn it, what they had to say would be heard. There was something in the extremity of that yearning as it surfaced and then plummeted that made me wish to be a writer, to reveal and expose, and yet to so constantly craft every word, so that I never would be helpless before another's heart or ear.

I'm not sure why my experience with my mother was so much in my mind as my thoughts drifted back to Dorothy, the first to come up to the front of the room when I opened the microphone on the day of

the conference preceding my week of free workshops. The forum where Dorothy spoke immediately followed a presentation by two writers who had been hidden children in Nazi Germany. They both had revealed the fact that it had taken them forty years to share their stories at all. Then a woman who had just taken her three children out of war-torn Bosnia had spoken. Unlike the hidden children, she couldn't stop speaking, as if in telling it rapidly, as it was happening, she might wake someone who would be able to make it all stop.

As I drifted off to sleep that night, I remembered a feeling that was strangely familiar to me, as without taking a breath, Dorothy introduced herself as the child who had discovered her father in bed with her two sisters. As punishment for telling her older brother, all four of the children were taken away from their mother and sent to a lonely and punitive orphanage.

"That is why I need to tell, to have this opportunity to break the cycle of abuse," Dorothy had said, before we could catch our own breaths. "You see I have come with my daughter . . ." And her daughter stepped up to the podium. Before the audience of strangers, they gave each other a hug.

"I need to tell you the whole story of how I went to court against her when she tried to get an order of protection against the man who was living with me," Dorothy had gone on, without letting go of her daughter's embrace. "I wouldn't believe that he was abusing her, so that I took his side against her, although now I can't believe I would ever have thought such a thing. Now we are both here because we need to let others know . . ."

When Revealing Becomes Flooding

I could feel how she was holding the audience in a spell of compassion and really deep interest, even as rapidly she began to uncover one secret after another. We were startled and moved in a unison that comes with the territory of certain kinds of confessionals, in the way that she dared to make her private thoughts public. We couldn't help but respond.

Yet I noticed that at a certain moment in the listening, when the revelations kept tumbling one after another, I shifted from feeling very moved to feeling flooded. I could pinpoint the exact moment when it happened, as my mind wandered from deepest involvement into a feeling akin to what I used to feel when my mother couldn't stop herself, when I wished more than anything to come along with her story

and yet could not. It was a moment that so often had been repeated when someone had had a need to tell and I had responded more to the need than the telling, when I didn't know whether it was myself or the teller who had been stripped naked too fast.

Trying to figure out what to do, I scanned the faces of the audience. Some eyes were looking upward and some were looking down, but all were looking away.

"Listen, I know this is horrible," I said with a force that I never was able to muster in those mother/daughter moments when I was a listener, just on the cusp between desire and being driven away, "but I'm going to stop you while the audience is still leaning forward wanting more."

I could see the shocked faces before me. Had I really dared to stop her, just as she was going to reveal yet another secret?

"The fact that the audience doesn't want you to stop is a good sign, because you are telling your story in a way that moves people a great deal," I could hear myself half lying, half telling the truth. For already a part of me knew that I was protecting her from the discomfort of that which would come crashing down on us all if she continued to offer such intimate material without boundaries or "Backstitches" that would help us to know her in a deeper way.

Boundaries and Backstitches: The Dare to More Consciously Shape

"Do you think you can save what you were going to say next for tomorrow?" I remember saying. "In that way we can help you write it slowly enough to allow us to feel its full impact."

Dorothy sat down, feeling grateful to be stopped, she would later confess. Still I shuddered at my own abruptness. For isn't this the universal nightmare: that once we begin speaking—once the words come out—we will be unable to control that great need to reveal ourselves; that it will all be so overpowering that the others will have to look down?

Was it true, as my mother often said, that I didn't have a heart? What could I do to make amends, to create a next time when I would truly want to hear? What could I do to help her in her obviously great desire to be heard, not only by her close ones but by a larger world?

But before I could finish my thought, there was another speaker, and yet another. The discomfort came faster and faster each time, as the details of each subsequent story built on the one that had come

just before it. Each time I could pinpoint the moment when the audience attention would peak and then recede.

Later on I would learn how to use those moments of peaking and vanishing in my own listening attention to help writers point their camera lenses as to where to pause or slow down. I would learn how to organize shifts in my listening/caring in relation to issues of narrative technique.

But that day, I couldn't go beyond feeling guilty and yet fascinated by the way that each woman standing on the podium was naked and very alone, yet at the same time elated by the power of finally telling. Each time that a new woman spoke, the nakedness escalated, but along with it, the sense of the breathing of the audience in a chorus would become almost eerie, until I would call for that pause that would allow her to slow down into the writing experience we were promising her the next day.

That night, as I drifted off to sleep, I thought about the power of telling one's secret to listeners who would so soon be gone, and then the bitter aftertaste of being alone with it again, left bereft and unheard in the particulars out of which real connections can grow. We can feel so connected, in public, in a moment, which is why, I suspect, so many confessions come publicly. But then the moment is gone.

I wondered, as I let myself sink toward unconsciousness, what would happen when we tried to both tame and inflame this group of strangers in the task of writing those stories down slowly enough so that the eyes of the audience would no longer have to be lowered.



We all have recurring dreams, whose content we cannot quite fathom. They are not really nightmares, and yet they are more than mere frustration scenarios. I often had dreamt that I was teaching writing in a gymnasium like the ones I had known in my public school years, with the floors all too shiny and the space all too big. Or else, I would be in a school yard, with its all-too-familiar cyclone fence, which seems to invariably evoke pictures of faces peering inward, when suddenly, instead of a comfortable group of eight or nine huddled around me, there would be many hundreds, coming on so quickly that they couldn't find places, not even on the bleachers that would magically emerge.

Invariably, the voices of those who were just starting to speak wouldn't be heard above those of the ones who were angry because they couldn't have a turn. The ones who were already writing wouldn't be heard, because those who needed to begin were so impatient. In my

dream I'd be thinking: If only it could be quiet enough for me to help the person to pause . . . wonder, then I knew that the story being told could be helped into a shape that really would reach the whole audience . . . even all of them, hundreds, if only they could be quiet enough, trusting enough, to wait . . . listen, until they could hear.

But instead their impatience took hold, like a great angry torrent, until everybody left, to leave me standing all alone in the middle of the gymnasium or the school yard, like Charlie Chaplin at the end of *Limelight*.



As I drove myself to the workshop, I thought about how there is safety in a book, how the writer can write it alone in her study or bedroom, and nobody can see whether she laughs or she cries, and how nobody can know whether her own words move her, or whether she is angry or scared.

The reader can read it all snuggled up in bed or in her favorite armchair, and nobody will see when her mind begins to wander or when she begins thinking her own thoughts. With her body stretched out as can be or curled into a ball, she can smile and nod all that she likes. No one will have to see where her life story overlaps the tale of the teller. As she meets with that undisguised voice of the stranger, who is quickly becoming all too intimate, she can privately thrill or cringe, as she thinks to herself, "Yes I did feel that way also, but before reading this I would have been embarrassed to admit it." Or "Yes, this is what happens when you are touched in that way," allowing herself to be tickled by those very particular shards of perception that are each person's way of defining her private self.

I thought about how far away from the reader the writer is sitting with her face averted, bent over first a writing pad and then a computer, grinding her teeth as she rather mechanically corrects the rhythm in this sentence or that, then suddenly noticing that something she almost passed by has become the main element, driving the plot.

But here she suddenly jumps up from her chair and yes, she starts dancing. For yes, she can call it that name—"the plot of [her] own life!" As she settles back down, here she works in a plume of cigarette smoke, a sensation of cold on her thigh, which reminds her of a bit of dialogue or a song. There she works in the lighting on a hand raised in motion until alas she can see it so clearly, just what the hand is going to do. She becomes so excited that she rushes to the refrigerator and consumes a whole chocolate cake she was saving for company.

Will the reader also feel an uncontrollable urge to eat when she comes to that page? For a luscious illusionary moment, reader and writer are in it together, creating a kind of duet in which the experiences, thoughts and emotions of the one merge and separate from those of the other.



I thought about the togetherness—both real and imaginary—that occurs when we start to give our personal stories a shape that another might hear. As in any love relationship (the relationship between reader and writer being really nothing more), without clear-cut boundaries, the connection cannot survive.

Was it because it was a time when I had not only lost a mother without boundaries but a love relationship in which boundaries were defied, that I drew some kind of modicum of comfort in contemplating how the lover (in this case the reader) must remain knowingly other?

The other two elements I will touch on in this manual were my own psychoanalysis, which inspired a great many of the techniques I was able to develop, for bringing each speaker “back there” in order to return to the time of each lived experience, as well as my friendship with Gerald Gargiulo, then head of NPAP’s Psychoanalytic Training Institute, who brought me into a deep understanding of the work of D. W. Winnicott, whose writings about transitional spaces profoundly influenced my work.



As we look for the tools that will allow us to reach out to that audience that never asked us to confess, I think we all know, in our heart of hearts, that the person whom I have affectionately dubbed the “Stranger/Reader” doesn’t intrinsically care what happens to us as we exist outside of the pages we create. Should I try to lure you much further into what it all means to me, your face would turn away. But let me collage my own “moments of being” (as Virginia Woolf called them). If I do so cleverly and movingly enough, I can promise that you will forget that you don’t know me. Once I catch you, my Dear Reader, as the wonderful eighteenth century novelists used to say, I will be able to lead you into my most intimate details, on and on through as many pages as I choose to generate, making you forget that I am only a pale paper stranger.

Shaping Stories in Front of an Audience

When I opened the doors to the Veteran's Hall of the Southampton Cultural Center, I had no idea who would show up, nor how many. The first day of the free workshops, eight women arrived; on the second day, twelve. By the third day, there were twenty, their presence filling up the large and awkward overstuffed chairs of the meeting room that would soon become our first permanent home.

The women who had been there the day before were so full of the stories they wanted to tell, they seemed to care far less than I did about who was listening. As I dared each participant to take a vague stab at a book beginning and then played with how it might lead into a flashback or a plot revelation, at first the newcomers would look around startled. But as they joined the play-acting game, first their opening scenes would emerge, and then often a tentative shape for a book.

In my years of teaching experienced writers, I had grown so used to talking about the books they were writing, I didn't realize it was odd until one of the newcomers looked at me with a laugh, and said, "Book? Well, since two days ago even the idea of coming to a meeting to talk about writing was so strange, why not?"

I was working hard. I was using every ounce of my literary training to weigh one opening moment against another, asking myself hard questions about how each Page One possibility would play out in terms of movement—both internal and external. I was thinking about timing and order, and even potential techniques. For I wanted to be sure that when the week was over, each of the women would be left with a structure strong enough to sustain whatever memoir-writing project she had begun.

The circle of writers was also working, but in an entirely different way, as I guided them into pinpointing the moment in each person's told story when interest in going forward was ignited. More and more, it was like playing out chess moves. "If you started here, then you could go there. If you did this, you might want to move backward into a memory. That memory could even be fifty pages or more. If you did that, the reader would go crazy if you didn't start telling us slowly enough to tease us about what might happen next."

The women were concentrating intensely, but they were also suddenly much more relaxed than they had been at the speak-out the day before. No longer were they trying to tell their whole stories all at once. It was as if, in the permission to write a whole book about their

lives and to structure it bit by bit, something in the urgency was relieved.



By the second morning, I was able to ask the women who had started on the first day to make believe that the newcomers were strangers in a library, browsing to see whether they might like to continue reading the books they picked up.

“Keeping this in mind, now read our newcomers your opening page,” I would say to those who had been up writing all night. “Or play-act it the way we just did when we worked together ten minutes ago,” I would say to those newer to the game. “But be sure to remember, when they open your book, they know nothing about you. They are quietly thinking their own thoughts, and part of them doesn’t want to come on your journey. Another part is waiting for you to invite them into scenarios they never imagined they’d find. So don’t tell them your life story. Simply paint them a scene.”

The women had been at this for only a day, yet already they were behaving as if this was the most natural way to introduce themselves. As each writer would finish her selection, we would talk for a while about where it might go next. She would warn the newcomer that in just a few moments she too would be asked to play out such a moment where she also might like to be met by a new Stranger/Reader walking in on her life.

Each time I replayed a short version of the process that had helped the others choose. Dorothy had been undecided about whether to begin in the courtroom where she was testifying against her daughter, or to start herself as a child walking in on her father—but suddenly decided to start it when all three sisters were happy with their mother, so that the reader would already care when later they were taken away.

Marilyn had been undecided about whether to start with a scene when she was a mother of five children under age five, including two sets of twins, barely twenty herself, watching them all playing in the room she had tried to fence off—or to start with the five faces in the window one dawn and the five waving hands as she went, reluctantly to try to get help ending yet another pregnancy. However, once she played out the images, she knew that the second scenario was where she needed to be. As newcomers came into the room, she would tell them that as the state chairperson of National Organization for Women, she had given speeches about her illegal abortion to audiences of hundreds, but it was only right now that she actually felt it, as she slowed down to become that lost self in a moment of time.

Chris was worried that with all of the serious stories in the room, she at twenty-two had nothing to offer. Then she found a moment when she was a child who believed in magic. This would make readers happy, she said. But once she started to frame it and found the child she had been in that moment, not only Chris but the whole audience was in tears.

Mimi, also twenty-two, had announced with the kind of grand philosophical statement only a very young person can muster: “I am worried I am losing my idealism. I want to write about that.” We dared her to find a Page One Moment that would tell this, not from her head but from a scene of experience. “I guess I would find myself as the child who used to put hearts with my parents’ names under my pillow,” she said, suddenly feeling all sorts of unexpected emotions. “It would be at the moment when I discovered they were no longer in love. So maybe my loss of idealism has to do with my no longer believing in love.”

Helen was comparing her own relatively flat beginning with Dorothy’s, not with self-judgment but with a new fascination that we were taking her seriously as a writer, when suddenly she was “back there” in a school auditorium in Harlem. “I was the only student taking the college admission tests in this enormous big room. Just now, when you treated me as if I could be a writer, I thought, ‘Wow, she is talking to me!’ which is just how I felt on that day in that enormous big room when I looked to my left and I looked to my right and realized with no one else present that the teacher who told me I’d passed had been talking to me,” she had said.



As each member demonstrated to the newcomers how to go about framing a scene that would start to tell the story most deeply in her heart, the sense of connection escalated and the power of the scenes being framed came on faster. Years later, a Native American student would describe the rapid-fire making of Page One scenes as a sort of trance journey back into past moments. “It is something you don’t normally do in the presence of others, so that it becomes like a shared drumbeat,” Pat Gorman would say. “It is the kind of a drumbeat that echoes the heartbeat of everyone making a scene,” both collectively and individually.

The fact that these past states could be shared was part of the enchantment. There was magic as well, in that talking about reader-related strategies didn’t weaken the sense of “There-ness,” but rather

“There-ness”

“There-ness,” as we use it here, simply means **BEING FULLY THERE**, as opposed to “About-ness,” which tells about an experience rather than taking us inside it.

Each student will have a different way of describing her own “There-ness,” as the concept becomes more and more natural. And each student will have a different way of detecting when she has strayed from being truly there.

heightened it. By keeping everyone there in the scene—becoming the writer, so to speak—we were able to field those personal questions such as, “Were you ever able to forgive your father?” or “Was your daughter ever able to forgive you?” and “What is it like for both of you now?” that are both intrusive and bad for the writing. We were able to build an intimacy in what we would be calling “Book Time,” while protecting the separateness of each writer to touch her product, without violating her.

What a difference this slowing down made for those who had flooded us during the speak-out format. There was still discomfort, of course, in the form of anxiety about what would happen next to the person whose story was no longer galloping away from the audience. It was the good kind of anxiety that keeps the reader turning page after page. With the gaps filled in, the speaker was no longer ahead of the listener in engagement.

What a difference it made for those who had been too shy to tell their stories, to be given permission to unfold a small moment that might make us want to know more!



This was the first time that I was working primarily with women who hadn’t written before. I wouldn’t have been so intrigued if the writing produced hadn’t been far more vibrant, but also more formed, than that of women working for a similar period of time within my closed workshops. Their level of concentration was at least as intense as that of my students of many years, despite the fact that they had to cope with an ever-increasing number of new strangers. Could it be that their focus was so strong because they had to keep refining their shapes for new ears?



On the third of the intended five days, I awoke bolt upright at 5 A.M., and I realized that this format—awkward as it first seemed—was answering some deep call, not only in the women, but in me. As I made my morning coffee, I couldn’t stop thinking about the private/public nature of this odd amalgam I had accidentally happened upon. For yes, it did retain the nature of a speak-out, except that from the beginning we insisted that the stories be told with a view to their shape. And yes, it did have some elements of the consciousness-raising of the seventies, but with something else added, through the making of a conscious product, each belonging to the individual whose mem-

Our Herstory vocabulary

As you read through this manual, you will find a variety of explanations of words such as “Backstitches,” “Containers” and “Springboards,” and “Sticking Your Toe in the Water Half-Way,” as we use them in the Herstory sense.

You will also come across invented terms that are passed on from one Herstory member to another, such as “Book Time,” “De-Organization,” “Jaggedy” and “There-ness” as opposed to “About-ness,” to name just a few.

You will find each of these terms in our glossary and index, so that you can trace how we apply them to various writing and workshop moments.

For right now, however, I’d like you to experience this invented vocabulary as a child might, as she learns a new language, through use.

ories were being tapped, containing boundaries far different from those consciousness-raising had spawned.

Why it worked, against all intuition that privacy and consistency were necessary, was something to be pondered and explored. I would think about it and write it up as a concept, I decided, and maybe someday, if the right resources came my way, I would start it up again. Something told me that it might even be fundable.

Meanwhile, the women who had started to write their stories were so excited that they rearranged their busy lives so as not to miss a minute of the workshops. They were speaking already about the books they were writing as if they were a fait accompli. Many of them stayed up all night writing—they were so happy to have a shape to return to and an audience ready to hear it the next day.

By the fifth and supposedly last day, I woke up again at exactly 5 A.M., but now knowing that it was not going to be simply a case of inspiring people and then letting them go. Despite the transient nature of the set-up, and the taken-for-granted welcome of newcomers, already the group was turning into a community. I didn't want to wait for that someday when we might find funding to pursue my hunch that I had hit upon something with a great deal of potential.

I asked if we might continue to meet at Southampton's Cultural Center on a twice a week basis. The village agreed to contribute the space, and I agreed to contribute my time.

Codifying an Experiment

As the weeks turned into months, and eventually years, we continued to alternate our meetings between evenings and daytimes, to accommodate working women as well as mothers and grandmothers with young children at home. Some came to every meeting, some just once a week, some every other week. There were always new strangers. There were house guests and visiting cousins who would come just to listen or to offer support, but soon they too were beginning to tell their own stories.

And after a while, the project, which had begun as a bit of an experiment, as to why such a public/private thing should work so well, took on a life that began to feel more permanent. Women were coming from so far away that we were invited to open another branch in a more central part of Long Island—in a community and counseling center whose teddy bears and boxes of tissues, bright sunflowers and freely wandering animals would sharply contrast

with the guns in their cases and displayed war helmets of our Veteran's Hall home.

And then there was another invitation and another: from a college specializing in human rights education; from a retirement community, asking for new members of all ages; from a library; from a group working with young mothers suffering from postpartum depression, who asked me if I would train some of their group leaders to add a writing component—until what had started as one person following a hunch about writing for a stranger became a community endeavor.

It all happened so gradually, and yet also so suddenly, that without any real planning of what shape we'd eventually need to take, first one and then another of our Herstory students most tuned in to the approach went from helping me to conduct demonstration workshops to taking over some of the newly forming groups. As each facilitator charted the direction closest to her heart—two moving toward work with women in prison, two moving to build bridges with Long Island's Latina community, and one moving toward work with adolescents in foster care—we began to see the need for a more formal manual to codify the tools that had so spontaneously sprung into being.

I was puzzled. Teaching—response, so to speak—had always come easily to me. Just yesterday, as of the time of this writing, after being exposed to hundreds upon hundreds of possible Page One Moments, a new student asked: “But can I write my Page One scene out of something that hasn't happened, but that I wish might happen?”

Immediately my mind sprung into action as I spoke of how wishes immediately spawn memories and placement in time, coming in *Invisible Backstitches*, letting the reader slowly know the wishing person's real story as well as her memories and dreams. My new student, framing her moment, placed herself in a city where she never had gone before, wandering around beautiful old buildings, in and out of elegant stores, which she wanted to describe in great rambling detail, when suddenly she said, “I would wake up to realize that I had been fixed.” I was sitting right next to her, and was tempted to guess what she meant by studying her externally for clues. But I had to remind myself that what is in our hearts isn't at all what is seen from the outside. The whole joy of writing is that the Stranger/Reader will only be able to see what the writer chooses to show.

Even if I could have guessed what our newcomer might have wanted fixed, I wouldn't have been able to second guess what it all meant to her. Instead, I gave her a dare, from the point of view of the

Stranger/Reader who would never be able to see more than what the writer decided she should see, that she might take advantage of the intrigued reader's compassion—of all that the statement, “I woke up to realize that I had been fixed,” might mean within each of our fantasies and dreams—to go on for fifty pages or more never telling the reader what “fixed” meant or what had gone wrong. Or maybe, in the shock of the very next sentence, she might find herself telling it all. But the freedom, the structure, to tell or to not tell, when and how to tell, would belong to her alone.

Daydreaming along with a writer first framing her pages had always come easily to me, but how could I posit universals, when each person's writing journey is so different? What will work for one writer will be just the wrong thing for another! Where one person must be pushed, another must be allowed to draw back. What will point one writer toward an important breakthrough will lead another astray.



How then will I speak to you who have asked me to try to put my approach in writing? How will I begin to share the many tools that the women of Herstory have invented in our shared mission to write so a stranger might care? How will I start to move you—you whom I might never meet except as a pale paper stranger on the page? How will I start to convince you that you cannot have E-Motion without Motion? How will I take you from the land of “About-ness” into being with me on the page? To dare you not to summarize or analyze but to take me back there, into worlds that I might not otherwise have known?

Healing Journeys, but Then Something More . . .

Among the first women attracted to our group were numerous victims of incest, family violence and poverty, and children of war. As they learned how to craft their stories so that they would be moving to others, there were dramatic and perceptible changes in their feelings about that “Self” who necessarily is the main character within the memoir form, and those changes in turn were mirrored in their sense of well-being and purpose.

It was one of those inevitabilities we discovered in the process: that long before they were ready to feel much compassion for the wounded selves that they had set out to write about, they had to invent forms to evoke the concern of the ever-shifting crowd of Stranger/Readers who

came to listen to what they had written every week. And after a while, their compassionate “invention” came true.

But soon other women came, with stories that they didn’t consider traumatic, tales that they could pass down to their children and grandchildren, of the hardships and joys of immigration, reclaiming roots and links that might otherwise have been lost. While initially I had wanted to give quality writing assistance to those who did not have access to resources needed to sustain book-length projects, as our program evolved and we began to look for foundation support, a good number of women who came to us as philanthropists were so moved by the work that the women were doing—as well as the sense of community that they witnessed—that they too decided to become Herstory writers. As college professors began to work side by side with women who had barely managed a grade-school education, we could see how more than in any other area of their lives, the women found themselves working with one another on level ground. Leaving the terminology of literary criticism behind, we developed our own vocabulary, half emotional and half technical, to describe times when the writer’s intent had been thwarted, so that after a while we all knew what we meant when we spoke about “Book Time” or “There-ness as opposed to About-ness” or making a rendition more “Jaggedy.”

These terms, along with the games played around the Imaginary Stranger/Reader, were passed on from one workshop participant to another, until certain women and their writing discoveries became legends, even for those others who never met them. Each woman who worked with us added another link to the understanding of how to change her very private memories into a memoir that would have its own set of writing dilemmas and discoveries. Each woman threw us another fast ball, even as she threw us a wide wreath of solutions to writing problems that would someday become our own. Each woman taught us something about breakthroughs and fears, about how to know when to push either oneself or another and how to know when to hold back.

Of course there were some people who were confused. With so many women coming to us seeking healing, could we speak about the making of art as our mission? Or perhaps, in our insistence on helping women who had been silenced to speak, we were primarily about fostering social change.

Certainly, I would find myself thinking, that was part of our mission, but could the healing of communities and the healing of

individuals be separated? Wasn't a deeper healing, the whole Greek notion of catharsis, what fine art was about?

And so, I would argue with the ones who wanted me to eliminate the word "healing" from the line that appeared under our logo, or the words "community building," that writing at its finest can conquer oppression. It can change hearts and minds. But writing that can do so doesn't happen by accident, which was why I became more and more attached to our set of empathy-based tools.

What would never be altered from the very first day, was the fact that from the beginning Herstory was an odd sort of hybrid, so that regardless of the particular mixture of people involved at any given time, it continued to maintain what struck us at the onset—that unusual amalgam of being both very intimate and public all at once.

And so it still is, after more than twelve years, that the sharing of intimate stories provides that sense of safety very often associated with closed women's groups, and yet because Herstory is open to whomever decides to join at any given moment, and because the women's stories are written deliberately to reach the public, it continues to retain the nature of a speak-out.

While it maintains that confessional quality associated with anonymous self-help groups, there is a very important difference in that we feel strongly that the act of naming is crucial. In allowing their stories, once written, to be told and retold by those strangers and new friends who bear witness, the majority of those who remain in the group leave behind any desire for anonymity.



As I write to you, whether you come to this process as a writer alone or as someone looking to build a Herstory-style community, I am inviting each of you to take what is useful from my approach and to use it to take off in your own direction. At times I've suggested that you keep a log of the discoveries you have made. It might be just a mental log. Or a single example or question may set you to writing pages and pages.

In addition to the "Ongoing Tools for Facilitators" and the method underpinnings contained in the sidebars, I have provided actual exercise grids. Use them as you wish, either writing directly in this book, or when you need more space, creating a notebook or computer work folder of your own. If you are working alone, you might want to use some of these exercises to inspire your own writing and teaching, while letting others fall by the wayside. If you are developing the

approach with others in your community, you might use them in your work groups.

Working with one exercise per two-hour session—after taking turns reading the section that preceded it (along with the sidebars)—continues to provide us with hours of lively discussion in our facilitator training workshops, ranging into areas of literary criticism and the philosophy of listening, as well as classroom process and writing technique. We never cease to learn from how each facilitator comes up with a solution that fits her style. Herstory writers who are not training to be facilitators have enjoyed group work with these exercises as well, as the topics they address come up in our ongoing workshops.



In contemplating what is up for grabs and what must remain fixed in order for our Herstory approach to become a viable alternative to more conventional approaches to the teaching of writing, we must note that our trained Herstory facilitators were required to begin as Herstory writers with an intensive hands-on immersion, attending several ongoing workshops each week. Most didn't start teaching until they had been with us as students for a number of years.

It is for this reason that I've constructed Phase One of this manual to take you through many pages of examples and even exercises before bringing you to our second section on starting to teach. While of course this can't substitute for being part of a live Herstory group, we hope that this immersion in the Herstory experience will at least partially make up for the hands-on experience you may not be able to arrange.

Our Future Plans

We decided to publish this manual in two phases. Phase One, which comprises this volume, provides a thorough immersion in what we have come to think of as the Herstory Philosophy and Practice. We have only lightly touched upon framing and working with text in this section, although the principles are interwoven throughout. This will constitute the bulk of our expanded edition to appear early in 2009. Because we see this as a practice that has taken our facilitators years to develop, it made sense to us to present it in stages.

Our expanded manual will pick up from where this volume ends, with a detailed section on implementing the Page One Exercise, which is the cornerstone of our approach, followed by a section on working

with actual text. It will contain many more Herstory writings and exercises, as it weaves through special sections on “Writing in the Voice of a Child,” “There-ness and About-ness,” “What We Mean by Book Time,” “On the Creative Use of Detachment,” “Writing about Altered States: Religion, Sex and Drugs,” “Dynamic Details: The Meaningful Cockroach” and “Endings: Tying the Pieces Together,” to name just a few.

We are in the process of planning a Herstory Institute to begin at first on a small scale in the near future, offering weekend and week-long seminars for those who are too far away to participate in our weekly hands-on training workshops. To keep track of this planning and for the release date for our expanded edition, please follow our website link under Replication Project, or write to us at contactus@herstorywriters.org

Plans are also under way to produce DVD segments to supplement this manual, to illuminate different aspects of the Herstory technique. We welcome your feedback as to which elements described here you would like to see supplemented by DVD modules. In the meantime, let this immersion in “Becoming the Stranger/Reader” take you into our method and rooms.



As more people begin to use this manual, it is my fondest wish that it will not be seen as a finished book by one person, but as an ongoing document of discovery and suggestions to which many will add their voices. I hope that the sidebar note sections will help you to do this.

Workshop anecdotes, used with participant permissions, are provided either anonymously or with first names. Writing excerpts, again with permission, are provided with full names. I am deeply grateful to those who allowed me to reproduce flawed first draft materials, before rewriting, in the interest of illustrating the way we work with actual text.



My working appendix provides a glossary of the Herstory terms as our writers came to use them, giving credit to each writer who invented each term. I’ve included the page numbers where you may see how the terms came into being and how they have been used. Again, it is my hope that you will add your own invented terms to mine.