

LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS

"Leslie is a profoundly wise, Christ-formed guide whose every word I will always read."

ANN VOSKAMP

New York Times
bestselling author

YOUR STORY MATTERS

FINDING, WRITING,
AND LIVING THE TRUTH
OF YOUR LIFE

Leslie Leyland Fields was not only my first writing mentor: She continues to mentor me with the way she actually lives her life and then shapes it into an unforgettable story that gives sojourners hope—and gives God all the glory. She is a profoundly wise, Christ-formed guide whose every word I will always read.

ANN VOSKAMP, *New York Times* bestselling author

When I first began writing, Leslie quickly became a trusted voice. Not simply on the art of writing but on the living, breathing act of writing. It's hard enough to use good verbs and precise language, but that's not the hardest part. The ghosts of our stories, the self-doubt, and the fear—those are the parts of the writing journey we all need a hand holding ours through. Leslie offers that critical companionship and inspires by example of what can happen when we learn to tell our stories.

LIZ DITTY, author of *God's Many Voices*

Leslie has a deep commitment to writing life-giving words. She crafts them beautifully and helps others do likewise. This book promises to prompt the best out of storytellers and creatives.

MAX LUCADO, *New York Times* bestselling author

This inspired writing warrior has plunged deep into her well of talent to teach a vital lesson: We don't own our stories. God writes them on our lives, then appoints us to stand up and share them. It's time to heed this truth and act. An impassioned Leslie Leyland Fields dares to show us how.

PATRICIA RAYBON, award-winning author of *My First White Friend* and *I Told the Mountain to Move*

A magical, moving, and essential book for anyone who wants to understand why their story matters and to write that story! Leslie Leyland Fields tells her story while helping others tell their stories, all while creating an extraordinary story of writing itself. Personal and profound, inspirational and practical, God-focused and with its feet firmly placed on the ground, this is a necessary and beautiful book for anyone and everyone because we've all been blessed with the story we have—and that story is worth our telling.

BRET LOTT, *New York Times* bestselling author, director of MFA program at the College of Charleston

Like many others, I've learned much about storytelling from Leslie. Leslie's many stories, some heartbreaking and some glorious, do something an abstract proposition can never do: They penetrate the hidden realities of the world in which we live, into

the barely known realities of our own life. Leslie will teach you how to find those hidden realities with texture and tone.

REV. CANON DR. SCOT MCKNIGHT, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary

Whether you write because you seek meaning from your life's experiences, wish to pass on your story to family and friends, or dream of sharing a testimony of God's work in your life with a wider audience, veteran writer Leslie Leyland Fields believes that your story matters. This book is a lively, relatable, and gracious master class that will guide you step-by-step through mining the riches of your life's experiences, bringing the core events to the surface, and shaping those events into writing that will communicate the story only your life can tell. Loaded with examples, prompts, and warm insight, this beautiful book belongs in the hands of everyone who longs to find a way to communicate their story to others.

MICHELLE VAN LOON, author of *Becoming Sage*

If you are never blessed with the opportunity to take a writing class from Leslie Leyland Fields, then at least read this book. It's a work of four strands: why you can and should tell your life stories, clear teaching on how to do so (with helpful exercises and student examples), stories from her own life, and a useful tale of working with an agent and getting published—in short, the entire journey. All told with the wit and wisdom of someone who is doing the hard work right along with you.

DANIEL TAYLOR, author of *Tell Me a Story* and *Do We Not Bleed?*

The greatest power of Story is to illuminate. That's how Leslie Leyland Fields begins her own story—a vivid retelling of pivotal events in her own life and an encouragement to each of us to tell ours. Written in her own bright, conversational style, this fresh writing book is chockablock with lived experience that translates into guidelines for our own storytelling. The author's energy bleeds from the pages. Read this, come face to face with this woman of God, and hear her affirm, "You can do this, and here's how."

LUCI SHAW, author of *Thumbprint in the Clay* and (forthcoming) *The Generosity: New Poems*

Whether you consider yourself a writer or are just beginning to find your story, I cannot imagine a more inviting mentor than Leslie Leyland Fields. The book you hold in your hands will take you on a journey. I'm convinced you'll find your voice, and the tools to use it, along the way.

CATHERINE MCNIEL, author of *Long Days of Small Things* and *All Shall Be Well*

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**FINDING, WRITING,
AND LIVING THE TRUTH
OF YOUR LIFE**

NavPress 

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Your Story Matters: Finding, Writing, and Living the Truth of Your Life

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*For all who have dared to remember, to write, and to share
their own remarkable story,
and for all those just beginning.
Wherever two or three gather to write,
God is there.*

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INTRODUCTION

*There is no greater agony than bearing
an untold story inside you.*

MAYA ANGELOU

I AM STANDING in front of a hundred women in a conference room in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, and I am not in good shape. I am jet-lagged after thirty-some hours of traveling. My brain is full of wool stuffing. My eyes are squinting, trying to peer through it. I am wearing black suede loafers, black slacks, and a burgundy blouse, but my clothes are not lending me any confidence today. I have taught in other countries through translators before, but I've never taught a writing seminar through a translator. And I know that everything I will say to these women will be utterly new; this is an oral culture, not a literary culture. Here, they believe that only important people write stories and books. I am nervous.

The women sit at desks with notebooks in front of them. I've met a few of them already at another seminar the night before: Oodmaa, Badmaa, Becca, Battsetseg, Erka. They range in age from nineteen to seventy-five, all with silken black hair, dark eyes, and busy, difficult lives. Some have driven in from the countryside, hours away. Some have come on early-morning buses. Some have braved the city traffic, a snarl of vehicles so dense that you're only allowed to drive certain days.

These women are shepherders, pastors' wives, doctors,

university students, mothers, tour guides, accountants. One woman is a professional driver for the government; some of them were once nomads and just moved to the city. A few of their husbands once lived in the underground sewers, alcoholics trying to survive the Mongolian winters next to the warm water pipes under the city. And some of these women are pastors. One of them has started two churches, one in a yurt outside the city, where I would go to preach that Sunday.

They're enrolled in a two-year school of ministry. And today, they are here for a full day of instruction in writing and sharing their own stories.

Because I am so tired, I am in overdrive. I speak with passion, I raise my hands in the air, halting every sentence or two for Chinzurig, the translator, to speak. I hold my position and my expression while my words are translated. I've come all this way, and I have so much to give them! The women sit with heads bent, taking detailed notes. I hardly see their faces.

Suddenly the director of the school of ministry, who is sitting against the wall, jumps to her feet and interrupts me mid-sentence: "Leslie! Could you stop a minute?"

I startle. I've been interrupted before, even heckled (in Hollywood, while receiving an obscure award and giving thanks to God!), but not like this. I look at her askance, mentally putting my hands on my hips but trying to look unfazed, professional.

Janice smiles sweetly at me. "I'm sensing that the women here don't feel worthy to tell their stories. They don't feel like their stories matter. What can you say about that?"

I already spoke to this. Didn't Janice hear me? I turn impatiently and watch the women as Chinzurig speaks her words in Mongolian. They are looking at me with wide eyes, as if someone has just spilled their deepest secret and they wonder what I will do with it. I see it then. I see the doubt. I see the glaze over their eyes and their hands

resting now from too many notes, too much information. I see them watching me as a white American woman, thinking of me as someone famous from a rich country far away, someone not at all like them.

My chest falls. Of course. They don't know who I am. I put down my notes, come out from behind the music stand that was my podium. I stand there before them with my arms hanging down. How do I tell them about this girl in the woods, one of six kids, who had nothing anyone wanted? I wore faded, home-made, hand-me-down dresses. I had four pairs of holey underwear to my name. Our food was doled out to our plates, and there was never any more. I had stringy hair because we washed our hair with soap—we couldn't afford shampoo. My classmates often made fun of my clothes and appearance. I've spent fifteen years of my life changing diapers. Every summer I live on a wilderness island in Alaska without flushing toilets or a shower. I am not rich, fancy, or important.

How much of this do I say?

I don't remember exactly what I said, but I ended like this: "I was a nobody searching for God, for something real and true. And God found me. He left the ninety-nine sheep and came out into the woods, climbed that mountain, and found me and carried me home. I am the hundredth sheep. And you are the hundredth sheep as well. We were all of us lost, wandering, and God found us."

"Tell me about that," I say to these women, who are now seeing me more clearly. "Tell me that story."

Every one of them—Oodmaa, Badmaa, Becca, Battsetseg, Erka, the grandma in the front row, the doctor in the back row, the Japanese pastor—their eyes are bright and wet, and in minutes their heads are bent and they are writing furiously. They do not stop, even when I ask them to.

I watch, breathing deeply, the wool in my head slowly dissolving. How did I forget? How did I forget in a class about writing stories to tell my own story? No matter what country we live in, no matter our neighborhood, our politics, our religion, our age, no matter even our shared pursuit of God, we risk passing like strange ships in the long night. Time, busyness, the speed of life will keep us apart unless we braid word around word from our own passage, then toss it out, coiled, shimmering, toward the hands on the other deck open, waiting to catch, to coil and secure the two ships together, hull to hull. Don't we all sail the same turbulent waters? Aren't we longing to stop for a while, to not be alone on the high seas?

I've been laying down one word after another now for most of my life. And have been teaching others to do the same for three decades. The process we'll enter in this book isn't about becoming a writer, though some of you will become writers through it. It's not about writing a bestseller, though that is also possible. No—this act of turning around to write into our lives is about recovering what's been lost and discovering all that's new. We know some of the truth of our story, but not all of it. Under our skin, a whirring, beating engine of a heart purrs and pumps us through our days, our years. And often we whirl so fast, our eyes are closed against the speed of it, the how of it, and especially the why of it. Every day we are different; the world awakens new, and the memories of what was and what we've been, and the discovery of who we are now, could all be lost. But we have this chance now to stop. We're stopping to ask the questions we did not know to ask. We're stopping to find the difficult and beautiful truths of our lives. And what a gift it will be, to send this awakening, these crafted and compelling words on to others, that they—and we—may not pilgrim alone.

That is what we'll do in the pages ahead. I'll lead you step-by-step

in discovering and telling your own unique story—or someone else's. And by the end of this first step in your writing journey, you will see what I have seen: that there is no part of human experience not worthy of attention, illumination, and restoration.

I'll take you as well through the story of Story in my life and the unexpected ways writing into my life has changed my life. I was reminded that day in Ulaanbaatar that this process works best when we do it together. So as I invite your stories, I'll share some of mine as well. Some of them are brand-new stories that I've just discovered and recovered in the writing of this book. They're mostly happy stories, but there are a few crashes along the way, some hilarities, a few absurdities, and even a bit of tragedy and cautionary tale thrown in the mix. I want you to know I'm on this path of discovery with you.

What will happen as you work your way through these pages? I can tell you what I've seen again and again, in prisons, churches, living rooms, classrooms, conferences, around the US, in Mongolia, Canada, South Africa, Slovakia, France. Everyday people like you and me have discovered that writing the truest words we can find from our lives can order our chaotic present, help us make sense of a jumbled past, move us from grief to hope. Writing can bring healing to wounds; it can even open the door for reconciliation and forgiveness. Learning to tell a truer story will help us live a better story.

I know this sounds like overspeak. I know some of you are skeptics. After all, we live in an Age of Story, and the stories that saturate our culture are not always benign. Since the rise of post-modernism, many have traded belief in knowable objective Truths with belief in our own personal stories and truths. "Your truth" and "my truth" and "my story" can be assertions of our own unquestioned perceptions. More recently, Story has even been co-opted as a sales strategy. Every business, product, and entity—from the

political candidate running for office, to the tire shop down the street, to the box of oatmeal on your breakfast table—regales you with their story using “story branding.” So caution makes sense. But we can believe in the importance and power of personal stories without disavowing grander truths.

In fact, this is the greatest power of Story: to illuminate and reveal larger spiritual truths in ways that mere facts can't quite do. Even in decades past, when our culture subscribed to facts and the knowability of truth, God's Word still spoke mostly through story. This Age of Story is an opportunity, then, not a crisis. Few people are interested in theological arguments. Even fewer will listen to religious clichés. But they'll still listen to a good story well told. As a friend recently said, “Most of my children and my grandchildren have walked away from the church. They won't listen to a sermon. But maybe they'll hear my story.” Yes, I say to him, to you, to myself. Tell them a true story. Tell them a better story than they've heard.

Some of you are ready! Some of you are waiting impatiently to dive into the rhythm and rhyme of this process. You've adopted two special-needs children from Russia. You're a mother, alone, raising your daughter in a wheelchair. You're capturing your childhood on the Kansan prairie. You're walking with your son out of addiction. You're recovering your father's stories from Vietnam. Whatever your story is, you know it's waiting to find its shape and voice on the page.

Some of you have lived awhile, and your children and grandchildren don't know half of your life. They don't know what you came from. They don't know what you endured, or the ways God showed up. Or the ways you think he didn't. (My father had only one story to tell of his time serving in the infantry in World War II. He was riding a tank in Germany. They stopped for a break. He perched on the outside of the tank while the others took shelter

in a barn. Suddenly he had the distinct urge to get off the tank. As soon as he approached the barn, a shell exploded right where he had been sitting. “Don’t you think maybe that was God who nudged you off the tank and saved you?” I asked my agnostic father. He shrugged. “Maybe.”)

You want them to know because some of these events have touched them, too, though they don’t know it. They haven’t been ready to listen, or you haven’t been able to say the words out loud. But you can write these words on the page. Or perhaps you are writing someone else’s story. My friend Joy is writing her mother-in-law’s story of living in France through World War II. Whether it’s your own story or someone else’s, you want to learn to craft a narrative that can belong to your whole family.

Maybe you have no idea what your “story” is, and you aren’t sure you want to take the time to find out. I get it. I was almost forty when I began to write about my life, and I was barely able to describe the hundred coexistent pieces, let alone imagine a single story from their frayed ends. That summer, I wandered the vales of my Alaskan island, muttering to myself, “What *is* my story?” And you know, I found it. Or it found me. Those words turned an isolated island into home. They turned a victim into a survivor. Those words carved and shaped an identity and belonging I didn’t know was mine to claim. My story was both harder and better than I knew. Yours will be the same.

Some of you are agnostics. You’re not sure you believe in words, and maybe not in God, the so-called maker of words. So you find this whole endeavor suspect. Of course, and bless you. The world—and Christian culture—provides way too many reasons to be skeptical. But I’m going to ask for a little “willing suspension of disbelief,” as Samuel Coleridge advised,¹ which is to say, I’m asking you to ditch your doubt for just a few chapters and give it a whirl. I’m not here to prescribe content; I’m here to walk beside you, to

equip you to write your stories, whatever they are, whether they're full of faith, doubt, anger, or disbelief.

If you are reading this book alone, I hope these pages will feel like your own personal classroom. Writing can be exhilarating and yet also lonely at times. We're more than enough, you and I and the others whose stories and experiences I have included in these pages. You can indeed work through this book and write stunning stories on your own. But I have to tell you, even more is possible. Over the decades, I've been astonished at what happens when people gather to write and tell their stories together. Writing in community, with a tangible, empathetic audience, often sparks stories that are rich in details, emotions, and insights. More than this, I've seen lifelong friendships form around this shared endeavor. Before you begin, as you think about whether to move through this book solo, with a few friends, or with a class, glance ahead to chapter 4: Your Stories Together. It will give you a glimpse of how to gather people together and what can happen when people share their voices and their work.

No matter how or why you've come to this book, or what stories you're hoping to unearth, or whether you come to these pages alone or in a class, we're going to learn together how to discover and communicate the truth of our lives with beauty and clarity. In some ways, it will be simple. I'll lay it out straight and easy, no matter if you're a first-time writer or you're fifty years in. At the end of every chapter, I'll walk you through writing prompts and assignments, with practical steps for discovering and writing your story. We'll also be joined by writers like you, mostly from my classes, bravely sharing their life stories to inspire our own.

But in other ways, this journey won't be simple. Because the reality that opens up before us, in the midst of the details and memories of our lives, is always full of mystery and wonder. So I must warn you: This work is utterly addictive. Once you start, such clarity,

discovery, and consolations will come to you that you will not want to stop. You'll realize that pursuing your story is also a pursuit of meaning in this wearisome life. Which means it's also a search for magic, for divine surprise, perhaps even a glimpse of God.

Why does this practice of unearthing the truth of our stories matter so much? Why am I spending so much of my life investing in others' words? I've seen what happens when we bury our past, when we refuse to look behind, at either the tragedies or the joys or any of the million little moments that make up our lives. I've seen in my own family all that's lost—to all of us. And I've seen what happens when we dare to overcome the silence. The morning I am writing this, I got an unexpected email. It was from Carrie, a quiet, unassuming woman who came to a workshop four years ago and insisted she could not write; she had nothing to tell. She sent a story, the first I'd read from her. It was about her brother, his near-fatal plunge over a waterfall, how her mother abandoned her and her siblings when she was thirteen and she had to become the mother. How later she joined her brother on his long-distance trucking routes before his dementia set in, damage from the fall. How she came to understand and reconcile with her mother decades later. Her story was so full of pain, love, and breathtaking details, it made me cry. Carrie wrote, "I think I have many more stories I must tell."

Your story matters. Let me help you find and tell the truth of your story. A compelling story. A crafted story. A healing story. A bigger story. And in the finding and telling of this story, I promise you'll live it too.

CHAPTER ONE

YOUR BIGGER STORY

Witnessing

In this one book are the two most interesting personalities in the whole world—God and yourself. The Bible is the story of God and man, a love story in which you and I must write our own ending, our unfinished autobiography of the creature and the Creator.

FULTON OURSLER,
IN THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF BOOKS

WHEN I ENTERED ninth grade, my sister and I were bused from our village school to Belmont High, a regional high school two towns away. This was the year I leapt the fence. I was tired of being the “good girl,” virtually the only one in my class who paid attention, who sympathized with the teachers, who tried to help hold chaos at bay. The first-through-eighth-grade elementary school we attended in this New Hampshire village was a war zone, where second graders threw ice balls at the teachers and hit them. Where my classmates ridiculed the teachers to their faces. Where the fifteen- and sixteen-year-old eighth graders cornered me and my siblings, threatening to beat us up every week. But I was in high school now. A new school. Another town. People were civil here. Maybe I could have friends. I sidled up to the popular kids. Occasionally I went to their houses on the weekends, where we’d sneak drinks from the liquor cabinet, smoke cigarettes, and saunter down the

street at midnight. I was fourteen and weary of being an outsider my whole life. But I never made a good bad kid. I loved school too much. Especially my English class.

Mrs. Butler was my ninth-grade English teacher. I see her now, in her gray cardigan buttoned at the top with a single button, a single strand of pearls around her neck, her sensible pencil skirts, her oxford blouses, her sturdy shoes, her brown hair in a kind of bouffant that ended up swirled in a bun behind her head. (Surely there was a secret sartorial manual circulating among women teachers at the time—and it was never updated past the late fifties). It was the early seventies then, and boys and girls alike were slouching about with a world-weary irreverence, wearing cropped tops and flared hip-huggers quilted with patches, their long hair parted in the middle. Mrs. Butler, on the other hand, wore a general bewilderment about the age and the wildly dressed students she found herself among.

I felt sorry for her, even as I showed up in my own kooky clothes: a gray rabbit-fur, ankle-length coat I found in our attic, which I paired with purple hot pants and platform shoes. Or a pair of old floral pants my sister had sewn that I painstakingly turned into hip-huggers. I had no money at all, but I had a bone of daring, a scavenger's habits, and a flair for the theatrical. All my efforts pitched to hiding our poverty.

Despite Mrs. Butler's disapproval of our wardrobes and our mien, she was unflinching in her efforts to teach us English. She taught grammar, mechanics, writing style—all the usuals—but underneath her formality, she cared deeply about literature and creativity and did everything to foster interest in both with creative-writing projects. I remember one story I wrote: about a girl who lived down a snaking dirt road in an unheated house. Every morning she rose in her below-freezing room, her breath a fog, to curate her small collection of garments, to apply makeup

secretively in a hand mirror. An hour later, she emerged at the bus stop a mile away, transformed.

I thought my story was a clever fabrication. I had no clue, even as I read it aloud to my class, that it was a story about me.

* * *

I have always known the facts of my life, but what it meant and how it mattered—I couldn't tell you. I'm guessing that you're the same. Of course, you know the sequence of your life, who your parents are, where you grew up, where you went to school, all that's happened since. But I'm quite sure you still don't know "the story" of your life. I'm talking about more than events. I'm talking about the meaning, the wonder, the arc of your life. Where you've been beyond all the *places* you've been. I'm talking about *who* you really are. What your true name is. Where you're going. What you have to pass on to those around and behind you.

I'm starting this book here, with you, with why *you* need to find and tell your story, because you may be the biggest obstacle here. (Am I right?) I'm guessing this because this has been true in my own life. I've always believed in the power of Story, but for years, I resisted writing my own. I spent years in undergraduate and graduate programs focused on writing and narrative, on *other* people's stories. But I began to feel restless. I was living a strange, divided life that begged to be named, explored, written. During the summers, I lived in the wilderness with my husband, working as a commercial fisherwoman on a stormy ocean off the Alaskan coast. Winters, my husband and I traveled, and I taught; we were in graduate school. I *needed* to bring language and clarity to this bifurcated life, but I was scared. My life was dangerous and risky in so many ways. As a commercial fisherwoman in Alaska. As a married woman who knew little about how to be married. As a

daughter from an unraveling family. There were mines by land and by sea. How could I write about any of this?

Almost ten years after college, I enrolled in one more graduate program to figure it out. Saying, “I want to learn how to write a nonfiction book” felt like saying, “I want to learn how to swim on the moon.” But I did it. Wrote the book. (And don’t you love language, the way I just compressed two years of agonizing work into a three-word sentence that makes me sound like some kind of genie who blinked and nodded this book into existence?) Oh the labor of it! The insecurities! The uncountable drafts!

But it was safe! I wrote about Alaskan women in commercial fishing. I told the stories of forty others, women who were tougher, more authentic, more worthy of attention than me. When a university press called to accept the manuscript I had sent on a fluke, I was stunned. I was sure it was a mistake. I didn’t know any writers. No one in my family was in the professions or the arts. We were ordinary, invisible people. If there was a cardinal sin in my house growing up, it was pride. Calling attention to yourself. Thinking that you were special in any way. (*You’re going to publish my book?*)

I was thirty-eight when it released, and underwater with babies, toddlers, and teaching. But I had hope now. And I couldn’t stop writing. I began another book, this one a sure hit with the New York publishing crowd: a collection of essays about hunting, carrying water, digging an outhouse pit, washing fish-fouled jeans in a semicomatose wringer washer. In short, my life in the Alaskan wilderness, none of it the purview of well-showered and high-heeled urbanites. But improbably, *Awake on the Island of Listen* landed me a hot New York agent. (The heat cooled, though, when I had to make an appointment six weeks in advance to snag a fifteen-minute call with her. I was clearly on the bottom of the dogpile).

But Kate¹ did me an enormous service. Here's how our first official phone call went:

"Leslie, I really like these essays, but there's one problem: You're not in them."

"I know," I replied. "That's the point. The book is the story of a place. About topics much bigger than me: about the ethical dilemmas of killing animals, about water, so many other things. It's about universals."

"Yes, but we don't care about universals unless we care about you. You're completely absent from this work. No one's buying essay collections. You're going to have to turn this into a memoir. This needs to be about you."

"A memoir?" And in the next few seconds, I silently listed every objection to writing about my life that you may be listing right now. Let's see how closely our lists align:

- My life is not that interesting. What do I have to write about?
- I am unworthy to tell my stories. I'm a nobody. No one will care.
- I'm scared to look behind me, into my past. There are mistakes and failures that I can't face. I just want to move forward.
- I'm not a real writer. I have no idea how to write a memoir.
- I can't write the truth. I'd like to stay married. I'd like to stay in my family.
- My life story? Aren't there enough memoirs and life stories out there already? Who needs another one?

Kate was much too busy to hear all these complaints, so I kept my answer short.

"Uhhhhh, no, Kate. I can't do that." And I hung up.

Memoir was a dirty word. I equated it with first-person, tell-all stories by strippers in smoky bars, and tabloids featuring disgraced politicians and ravaged movie stars flinging fresh scandals at every shopper in the checkout line. I couldn't do it. I would continue to write impersonal essays detailing the complexities of the natural world, with no cost to myself. *And*, for extra measure, without revealing my Christian faith, which was suspect in most quarters and would harm my fledgling literary reputation, if I possessed such a thing.

But here is the beginning of my conversion. A writer came along, Frederick Buechner, who spoke such sense and truth that I began to reconsider my antipathy toward personal writing. In his book *Telling Secrets: A Memoir*, Buechner writes,

My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours. Maybe nothing is more important than that we keep track, you and I, of these stories of who we are and where we have come from and the people we have met along the way because it is precisely through these stories in all the particularity, as I have long believed and often said, that God makes himself known to each of us most powerfully and personally. If this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually.²

Buechner's memoirs recount quiet moments, moments no one else would notice, yet through his questioning eyes and pen, he captured a sacredness and a beauty in the midst of the quotidian that opened my own eyes. In *Secrets in the Dark*, he identifies a choice that is presented to us every day: "Either life is holy with

meaning, or life doesn't mean a damn thing. You pay your money and you take your choice."³ I already believed that washing clothes, fishing for salmon, hand-digging a well were all sacred in some way and worthy of exploration and record. But could it be possible that *my* story was "holy with meaning" as well?

Then I encountered the memoirist Patricia Hampl, who nudged me further. She wrote, "For we do not, after all, simply *have* experience; we are entrusted with it. We must do something—make something—with it. A story, we sense, is the only possible habitation for the burden of our witnessing."⁴

Who does not carry these burdens? Might it be possible to make a home for them? And might the burden be lighter because of it?

It took a month to get another phone appointment with Kate. The next call went like this.

"Remember you asked me to turn that essay collection into a memoir?"

"Yes, of course."

"Okay, I'll do it. "

"Good. I knew you would."

Then I got brave. "So, how do you write a memoir?"

She laughed, or something equally unhelpful. "You'll figure it out."

It wasn't easy to invite that *I* into my house. I had to learn so many things. (One of which was, don't clean the house before you let her in!) But deciding to write my own story changed my future. It changed my past. I believe it will change yours as well.

For now, remember the first time you ran away from home with your little brother, when your mother had kicked you out of the house? And how you held hands, terrified, down the winding road while cars rushed past, and you turned around when your fear of the cars finally overcame your fear of your mother?

And who else knows how you've cared for your daughter with cerebral palsy all these years, feeding her every bite of food, singing Beatles songs with her?

Remember when you took your son to the mountain outside town to watch the Christmas fireworks and he lost his shoe over the cliff and you ended up piggybacking him down the rest of the trail while you both sang "Deep and Wide"?

Do you see? It all matters. In a divine economy, none of these moments are wasted. Not the fall of a chickadee from your tree or the wandering of a rebellious sheep or the loss of a strand of your hair goes unnoticed by God.⁵ And since the One Who Is Running All Things, including galaxies, takes care to notice lost sheep, dying sparrows, and falling hair, we should notice as well. Writing helps us notice what God notices. So write your story because God attends to every moment of your life, and you should too. Writing is a form of attention, a form of prayer, a form of listening to God. Even when God feels distant, through writing, through this book, we have a new way to aim our eyes, to tilt our heads to hear.

If you could see me here, you'd see me leaning in close, and maybe even whispering: *Writing the stories from our past enables us to live them again, but this time we live them wiser, better.*

* * *

The bus my siblings and I took to school and back every day didn't take us home. Every afternoon, those two-way doors would whoosh open and deposit us at the bottom of a hill. It was almost a mile up that steep, winding road to our house at the top. At an elevation of eight hundred feet, the hill was almost a mountain. Our legs knew it was a mountain. Every morning we ran down that mile-long mountain to catch the bus, and every day after school

we waited forty-five minutes for the second run of the bus, and we were at the very end of the forty-five-minute ride. Then we slung our books against our chests, put our heads down, and pushed ourselves up that last long mile. We leaned against that mountain during rainstorms, lightning, and thunder, in zero degrees. Our gas budget—a dollar a week—wouldn't allow a daily drive up and down the mountain. And we had legs, didn't we?

Our bus driver was Mrs. Fifield, a tall, heavy woman with short, black hair. I was afraid of her. She'd yell at the rowdy kids who sauntered on board with greasy hair and crooked grins, insults and fists, ready to fight. We'd slink into our seats, hoping they'd leave us alone. But she was not to be tampered with. She kept an eye on us, glancing up at us often in her oversize overhead mirror. Her watchful gaze made me feel safe.

For the first fifteen minutes every day, we were alone in the bus. My brother Todd and I always chose to perch in the last row. Mrs. Fifield drove fast enough, even on the dirt roads, that when the bus hit the potholes, we were launched for two full seconds of flight. It was our favorite moment of the day.

One winter day, the snow came especially hard. I was in seventh grade. School was let out early for the blizzard. The heater on the bus roared as we slid and rounded Route 3B, slowed by the sideways blasts of wind, past the collapsing house, to finally end up at the bottom of the hill. We were the last ones off.

The snow fell like banners from the trees, the road was barely visible, and as the bus crunched to a stop, five of us pulled on our mittens and hats, cinched our coats tight, and readied to enter the storm. I saw Mrs. Fifield looking back at us and then looking out the windows, shaking her head—and then the unthinkable happened. The engine roared, and we lurched forward as Mrs. Fifield pulled the massive wheel to the right. She was turning up our road. Our jaws fell open. We caught one another's eyes. No one

gave us rides up the hill. Ever. Now, in this blizzard, the bus was going to climb our treacherous mountain? It was madness. Maybe we wouldn't even make it. But I was filled with an inexplicable light. Mrs. Fifield was carrying us up the mountain. I didn't know anyone could be this kind. And I wonder now if Mrs. Fifield hit those potholes running just for us.

* * *

How strongly the past pulls, even now. But don't worry. I will not urge you to wrangle a shiny lining from the death of your sister, from your prodigal son or your lost marriage. As I talk about finding a bigger, better story, I'll be talking a lot about telling the truth. After thirty years of writing and naming, I know this: Often, redemption comes simply by bringing language—which is bringing light—to the silence. Every time we lock up a person, an event, even an entire decade in the Closet of Forgetting and Denial, we're robbing ourselves of the strength and wisdom that can come from those experiences.

Those events came to us, I believe, with some kind of meaning, maybe even purpose. If God is in and through our stories, surely he means something by the "burden of our witnessing." Just as we've been shepherded into pastures by quiet rivers and through shadowed valleys, we get to shepherd and steward these burdens, all of them—the beautiful, the brilliant, and the horrid. Through telling and writing, we have another chance to reclaim and redeem those moments. And sometimes they are redeemed simply by being faced and called out of the dark. When we can name our ghosts, they haunt us less.

Do you need one more reason to write your story? Here it is, from an astronaut who came to one of my workshops in Alaska. She had flown four missions to the space station and held the record, at the time, for the longest stay in space. She had been on

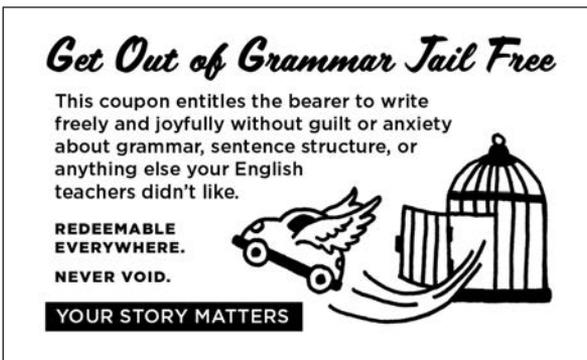
the cover of *Newsweek* and the subject of dozens of articles. “I have to write my story because if I don’t, someone else will,” she said, with a steely gaze. “And they won’t get it right.”

I have so much to share about all of this. Know this for now: Your stories are bigger, more important than you know right now. Bring them out from the dark. From silence into words and voice. Notice what God notices. Answer back. Your story will only get better.

Your Turn!

I’m going to guide you through this writing process chapter by chapter, but my words are only invitations to yours. In the end, your words in response to mine are what will matter most. (I can’t wait to read some of the stories that will come from these pages!) In this section, at the end of every chapter, I’ll include writing prompts and assignments. Most of the chapters will include two sample life stories written mostly by people in my classes—people who are not professional writers but who, like you, are finally answering the call to pen their story.

As you write, let go of any fears about writing perfectly or even well. We’re not attempting grammatical or literary perfection. We’re simply remembering, writing freely and joyfully and with encouragement for one another. Here’s the card to make it official:



As you write, spend as much time or as little time as you want on these writing prompts. Write one story or ten. Make it one page or ten. This is guilt free. Go and write, and see what happens!

1. Let's begin with a simple question: Why did you decide to read this book? What are your goals right now for reading and working through this material?
2. Many people who show up in my classes have been waiting for years to write their story. If this is you, too, what are some of the reasons you've waited? Make a list of your concerns and obstacles.
3. Because you're holding this book now, I suspect you've already answered some of these fears and concerns. Write down your responses now to those fears. If some are yet unanswerable (like "What will my father say?"), leave them blank—for now. As you go through this book, I believe you'll write past and through every one of these concerns. You *are* going to do it: Write the stories you have waited so long to write!
4. In this chapter, I recount riding the school bus. How did you get to school each day? Describe that process in writing, and any particular stories that come to mind.
5. Read the following essays, which are both about a childhood experience with God. Then write about an early encounter you had with God, or with a sense of something beyond your understanding. What happened? Write to discover—who knows what you will find!

GROWING TALL

By Arabah Joy

I was only four, but the memory is clear. Church was over. I found myself once again out back with Michelle O'Reilly. I don't remember who started the fight, but she shoved me facedown into the bush. Blades from the scratchy plant bit my bare legs. She stood over me for a moment, sunlight filtering through strands of her hair, obscuring her face. The bush tangled around me, and the fire ants found my legs before I did.

Propelled by flames, I charged after her. I soon caught her, grabbed her arm, and took revenge the only way a four-year-old knows how—I bit. Sinking my teeth right solid into her arm felt glorious . . . but the satisfaction was short-lived. Michelle screamed and ran to her father, yelling, "Arabah bit me!"

The crowd who gathered, filled with holy indignation, expected, even demanded, punishment for such a blackhearted deed. Back in the midseventies, God was foremost a God of justice . . . or at least, that's what my child heart understood.

The O'Reilly family folded their arms slow and tight across their Sunday best and leaned back against the hood of their truck. The Beck and Morrow families followed suit. Dread coursed through my body at what was coming.

My father, with tight lips, walked me to the side of the church to the oak tree, the young one with the tender branches.

"Pick your switch," he told me. This is how it always was: slow. Calculated. Bone-chilling. I wasn't yet old enough to understand which branches, in their seasoned years and weathered maturity, were allies. I picked one I could reach, young and vulnerable, like me.

For the third time that holy day, my legs stung, red welts blistering to the surface up and down my thighs and calves. When my

punishment was over, I dutifully apologized to Michelle and her family, face hidden in shame, before being sent to the back seat of the car. The adults still had their conversation to finish. Justice demanded I, the sinner, sit with my guilt.

Peeking through the glass of the back-seat window, I caught the looks of the church crowd. They approved of my father's immediate and appropriate action. I watched him shake his head at his worm of a daughter.

Then Jackie came to wait with me in the car. Jackie, the man whose approval I desperately wanted, the one who groomed me to need it and then took advantage of it for years after. His eyes crinkled in mirth as he saw my legs. "Did you get a switchin'?" He laughed at me.

It wasn't funny to me. Back then life wasn't funny, and God wasn't either. I'm not sure how one can grow smaller, but in the back seat of the car with Jackie that day, it's what I started doing. That's the way I grew all during childhood: small.

But something changed one day a few years later. Every day I would ride the bus to the Christian school to be taught what good Christians should know and do. I learned how to act. I learned how to do good, all the while knowing deep down I'd never *be* good. I was too deeply stained for that. The gospel simply wasn't for me.

This day we were traveling down Sydney Washer Road, that long strip of gravel that took us from our rural town into the big city. Mrs. Myers had the lights on in the bus, which meant we all had to be silent because she was having a bad day. We passed Janice's house with the big, green pond out front. I knew the Owenses' trailer park was coming up soon. That's where Michael lived with his alcoholic father. One. Two. Three. I tried to count the trees along the embankment as the bus sped down the road. Counting was a great distraction, and soon I was breathing easy again.

Everyone was silent. Perhaps the silence that morning provided the margin for me to hear, for somewhere around that run-down trailer park is where I heard the still, small voice.

“Heidi.” He spoke directly to my heart, calling me by my given name. “I love you.”

I wondered at the words I’d just heard. I’d never heard them before. I didn’t hear them again. That was it. It wasn’t an exegesis of the gospel or a four-point message delivered by a pastor. It was four simple words spoken straight to my shattered, hopeless heart.

With those four words came enlightenment. Understanding. No, I still don’t understand how children are abused and no one seems to care. I don’t understand how mothers and fathers can despise their own blood, or how pastors can be self-seeking and Christians can be so hypocritical and this world can be such a horrific place. There are many things I don’t understand.

But this is what I did understand that day: I understood that the heart of God is good. I understood that my life mattered to him. I understood that I was seen and known by a God I thought I’d never be good enough for.

On that dusty back road in the middle of nowhere, to no one else and without the slightest fanfare, the God of the Universe whispered that the gospel was for me. Yes, even for me.

INNOCENCE

By Ann Conway

I do not remember the precise moment that I felt God as a child because I cannot recall him not being present. Very early on, I felt God was incarnated everywhere, that he was waiting to be seen.

This was not because my family was devoutly Catholic, and our lives infused with religion, but because of a primal sense of

grace, embodied in the presence of my aunt Gabe, my mother's unmarried sister. She lived with my parents, two brothers, and me in a small, gray house in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Providence, Rhode Island. My mother had gone back to work as a teacher when I was four, so I was cared for largely by Gabe, who worked a split shift at a nearby hospital cafeteria and thus was free during the hours between breakfast and "dinner," as we called lunch, and before supper.

Gabe was in her forties when I was born. She was perhaps an unlikely candidate to be God's emissary—handsome, wisecracking, full-bodied, and pretty much toothless. My aunt had dropped out of ninth grade and, by the time I came along, had worked for twenty years in a hospital cafeteria.

"I had my fun, kid," she said of her youth in Prohibition-era Providence. After a day on her feet, in the evenings Gabe often drank Narragansett beer and smoked unfiltered Pall Malls. She loved delicacies like liverwurst and pigs' feet. But she always went to Mass, never swore, and never wore pants.

Gabe had a lot of the child in her and was without pretense. "I'm the dumb one!" she'd crow, speaking of her more educated brothers and sisters. She was never ashamed of who she was or what she did, which to me meant that God was close by. Security in the self can bespeak deep faith.

The outings I took with Gabe as a small child reinforced my sense of grace. I seemed to smell God everywhere, especially via the luscious scent of moist earth and ripening tomatoes in the hospital greenhouse. I felt God in the small rippling brook in the middle of Pleasant Valley Parkway, where my aunt and I floated twig boats during her breaks. I heard God in the ticking grandfather clock that graced the large, empty dining room where I sat and colored while my aunt, who was the cashier, sat at the head of the adjacent cafeteria line. I felt God when I sat with my aunt

after work in her tiny bedroom off the parlor, where she polished her shoes with white liquid polish and let me make dolls out of all her Kleenex. It was peaceful and safe, and I felt I was under the shelter of God's mighty wing.

On her days off, we strolled down Chalkstone Avenue, the main shopping district of Mount Pleasant. What may have seemed mundane to an adult was to me emblematic of the world's splendors. I felt that sumptuousness when we visited Walcott's 5 & 10, with its numberless shelves of cheap toys, cosmetics—including the rouge, powder, and crimson lipstick my aunt favored—and all kinds of school supplies and stationery.

I felt God when we visited the cobbler, a bent, old Italian man who sat at his bench in a tiny storefront on the corner of Chalkstone and Academy avenues, and in the Superior Bakery with its enormous glass cases full of row upon row of jewel-like pastries—amaretti, sfogliatelle, tiramisus.

Like many in the neighborhood, Gabe loved to tell stories. When I learned to read, I was amazed, thinking that through these new stories, I could go anywhere: back in time, forward, to all countries. I believed that the startling miracle of reading came from God.

Throughout her life, my aunt took on special requests from God, such as loving people who were difficult or lonely. She was always running errands for somebody. In my early life, she shopped for Kate Mohan, an ancient, miserly spinster whose family had owned the The Beehive, a barroom down the street.

I remember Kate, impossibly old, hunched in a kitchen chair near her manic parakeet, Jippy. As she dictated a grocery list for Gabe's trip to the A&P, I wandered through the tenement. The parlor was stuffed with marble-topped tables and old-fashioned lamps with crystal prisms, like in the movie *Pollyanna* with Hayley Mills, which Gabe and I had adored.

When Kate died, she left two hundred dollars to Gabe and sixty thousand to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which made my aunt roll her eyes and mutter darkly.

She got over it. I have never met anyone so unattached to possessions, to money. Nevertheless, she bought most of my clothes and toys. I recall her standing for hours in front of an enormous doll display at a local Christmas bazaar; she was determined to win the raffle so I could have a doll.

Maybe I had such a vivid sense of God because he was silhouetted against the dark. The years ahead would be difficult for me and for Gabe. In this account of my early years in Providence, I do not mention my parents because I retain no early memories of them at all, although I know I was petrified of my father.

As much as possible, I tried to stay with Gabe, away from both of my parents. They were a bad match from the beginning, and I never saw an iota of affection between them. When my mother returned to teaching in 1958, the marriage had broken down completely. In those days, a wife who worked outside the home was a sign of a husband's failure. My father had not gone to college and never made enough money. He told my mother that he would "break" her.

Not surprisingly, my two brothers exhibited serious behavior problems. Eventually they were diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic and were in and out of the state mental hospital.

My parents moved us to the suburbs just after I turned nine, without Gabe. From my preteen years onward, I'd be trapped with my warring parents and disturbed brothers in a 1,100-square-foot ranch house. Gabe did the best she could to continue to provide a refuge, but the next nine years were very difficult.

However, that story is no longer my life's central narrative. I wrote this essay because I know why I am alive—because of Gabe and God. Though I have long since returned to my religion, for

many years, I turned my back on God. It took a long time to get over feeling buried by all that had happened to me since I was a shy, cossetted little girl nurtured and cared for by a “nobody,” an ordinary aging woman who spent her days on a high stool, handing people change from an old-fashioned cash register.

When I accompanied my aunt on our simple excursions, Gabe always remarked, “Isn’t this lovely?” as if to underscore the experience. I thought that her love, which was God’s love, was lovely.

When I held tightly on to my aunt’s hand, I knew that God was a miracle of opulence, although I also understood scarcity—of love, of money, of parents who *were* parents. But sparseness caused love and goodness to stand out more clearly against the darkness in the world. I knew that goodness and spiritual largesse should never be taken for granted, ever. In my mind, every instance of them was cause for rejoicing.

When I was very small, I sometimes looked in the mirror and thought, *Me!* I was thrilled to be alive.

Looking back, I do not think this was narcissism; it was innocence. I was amazed that that God had created me and every other unique person; indeed, he had created everything else in the universe throughout time. Evil was real, but how beauty and virtue flourished, how they shimmered and vanquished the dark. It astounds me still.

