

Chapter 3. The Challenge and Lure of Creativity

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Free to Write Poems

Dorothy Bryant

Since my late twenties, I have been writing prose – mostly fiction of some length, novels, some non-fiction, (reviews etc.) – much of it published with "mid-list" success. Now in my eighties, I find that, despite my careful outlining, copious notes, and checking back and forth, I cannot easily access the deeper well of plans for plot, characters, etc. that fills with notes, memories, observations, transformed into something I didn't know I knew, at a deeper level. The logical switch would seem to be to short stories, but this logic is deceptive; short stories grow by quite different rules, with different accents, and I have always found them a more intricate and difficult construction than novels.

As for poems, they seemed too far beyond my reach – using words for meaning compressed into music. Furthermore I was comparatively ignorant, although I suppose I'd read somewhat more poetry than the average reader. I was quite happy to read more poetry, to gorge on it, examine it over and over again, as I would a painting or some other visual art.

I knew I needed a shorter form that I could see wholly as I rewrote. But I lacked the courage to try. I realized that I feared creating embarrassingly rotten, banal, terrible poetry, like what I used to get from students, who would say things like, "Well, no I don't read much and never write, but I guess I could write a poem." As if they thought that the shorter form was easier because the fewer the words, the easier (instead of the reality, which is the opposite)!

Finally I told myself the obvious fact -- no one was compelling me to show my so-called "poems" to anyone. I was free to write whatever stupid thoughts and phrases rose to the surface of my cluttered mind.

So that's what I'm doing.

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(inspired by signs posted in some City parking lots. Permission to quote is granted.)

Dorothy Calvetti Bryant is a native San Franciscan, born in 1930, daughter of immigrants from Northern Italy. She earned her living teaching in high school and college, and began writing (at first mostly fiction, later plays) at age thirty. She is grateful that her health continues to allow her to enjoy her greatest pleasures, reading and writing.



Dorothy Bryant (1998)
[Photo by permission]

Plant Your Feet

Ahni Robinson

I'm standing on stage at Cesar's Latin Palace, a gigantic ballroom in San Francisco's Dogpatch district, looking out at the dance floor. On either side of me are sets of massive speakers, above is a bank of industrial lights. A soundman, named Lionel, is setting us up, and my music is in front of me. I need to stay calm.

"Plant your feet solidly, like you're a tree, in front of the mic, raise your arms...then blow," my flute teacher, Mary Fettig, answers my question about gigging and controlling your nerves. I like the tree metaphor. It's tree pose, letting your roots go deep down. I think roots and trees and wait to begin to play.

I had always wanted to play music with people, especially when living in a remote country commune in the early '70s called Black Bear Ranch. There was no electricity so we entertained ourselves. I remember looking at the row of guitar players with envy, but I was blocked musically. So, I danced. When I lived in the city again, I bought my first flute at the House of Woodwinds in Oakland. But the demands of making a living, and raising a daughter with a new partner took over, and my flute languished. It's such a hard instrument to play, just you and the blow hole. It requires daily practice. Who had time?

Then time opened up. In 1998, at age fifty-four, I received a serious health diagnosis...one that forced me out of my job and required me to stay home. I was sick and in crisis. One day, as I was vegging on the sofa, my eyes landed on a shelf over the TV in our living room. There was my flute. I went for it.

My formal musical education began in 2001 with an improv class at the Berkeley Jazzschool taught by Jean Feinberg. My head was spinning with the new musical language...Dorian mode, diminished chords, blues scale. One thing led to another...more classes, La Pena Latin Big Band, Jazz Camp West, Real Books, a trip to Cuba, Berkeley Jazz Workshop, mentors Dave, Jim, Seward and Miguel, a women's jazz band called the Delfinas, a sound system, my Latin dance band, Bahia Son!!!

We're back at Cesar's now. Its 9:00 pm and we've had the sound check. I quickly glance at my band mates. They're such cool people and we collaborate so well. I'm happy that music offers me a place in such a diverse community. Music is continuous learning, better listening, dancing, concert going, festivals, and people to meet and get to know. All you need to feel full and alive and in the mix.

And my health has improved. The music has healed me, and I'm having loads of fun.

Born in New Haven, Andrea (Agni) Robinson was with the Mississippi Summer Project while a college student in 1964. She has worked as a furniture maker and university administrator and today enjoys family life in Berkeley.



Agni Robinson (third from left, 2014)
[Photo credit: Alan Bernheimer]

A New Perspective on Career and Retirement

Bonnie Best

I've been a teacher since I was three years old. I'm the youngest of four in my family, and the only one who got a college degree, a BA and Masters in Education. My first professional teaching assignment was in 1969, at the age of twenty-three. After nine years teaching sixth to eighth grade math the district closed my school and I went to work at the phone company as a computer programmer, later promoted to manager and strategic planner. In 1987, at the age of forty-one, I took early retirement and started my own business. I traveled and taught in the U.S. and other countries.

In 1999 I learned to write Haiku, even though I did not think of myself as a poet. I posted them on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and a blog I created. In 2012, at the age of sixty-six, I published my first book *Inspirational Poems, Volume 1*. I have other books I want to publish. I recently turned sixty-eight and continue to focus on my career and dreams.

My business ventures are varied. Unlike earlier generations in my family I've chosen to use my different talents. My mother chose to have a family and gave up her dream of being a nurse. My father started a business, and she helped him. Both parents encouraged me to get a good education and be what I wanted to be. I was always independent and chose my own path.

People have suggested that I "focus" in order to be more successful. Even though I understand the power of focusing, it has been a challenge for me. I enjoy variety and I get bored with

routine. I have learned to focus for short periods of time in order to accomplish meaningful projects before I tackle something new. In the past, my projects might go unfinished, and then I'd be upset with myself and feel like I failed. If I got overwhelmed with many projects I might drop everything and start over. That did not work well for me or anyone involved. I've developed a much healthier technique of renegotiating my priorities and finding other people to complete my unfinished projects.

People seem amazed at my energy level and drive to achieve more and more. At an age when people often retire and relax, I chose to move forward and help people live the life they truly love to live. After being a mediator for ten years, I began to teach people to use computers. Eleven years later, I retired from teaching computer classes at a local adult school in order to focus on my business as a Wellness Consultant. I enjoy coaching people to find a balance: healthy body, mind, family, social life, and finances. After much inner searching to determine my purpose in life and my mission, I realized that I love to teach and inspire. Joy and Love are very important to me. I became certified to teach workshops based on Marci Shimoff's best-selling books, *Happy for No Reason* and *Love for No Reason*. I also learned a technique to release trapped energies and patterns of behavior that stop us from being successful.

My father taught me that retirement is simply choosing to shift to a different career or type of work, or service. That has guided my behavior and choices. I am always open to learning something new and tackling new projects.

The following poems illustrate my style. A woman who created a website called *The Haiku Guru* interviewed me and noticed that my poems are spiritual. My poems come through me from the Spirit within. I often say "my poems are Spirit speaking to me and through me."

Connect with Spirit
listen to message within
enjoy all events
Connect with Spirit
in silence listen with joy
soar like the eagle
Release the past now
memories can bring joy or pain
today is fresh start
Be aware of source
events bring me happiness
joy comes from within
The freedom to choose
to enjoy trees, air, water
and to love people

Blending her teaching and coaching skills, Bonnie Best enjoys helping people experience more in life -- more joy, passion, love and success. She teaches people how to improve communication, internally and externally, in order to have better relationships. Bonnie believes that every person has a dream, and she loves to help people explore and manifest their dreams for real success. Bonnie's website is www.bbest.com.



Bonnie Best in 2014
[Photo by permission]

What is Sixty-Three?

Gayle Ann Weinstein

If I had understood the yearning of my soul and had known how to interpret messages from my inner self, I would have known early on that I was a writer and artist. But my sister was an artist, and I was good in school, so I thought and my grandfather encouraged me in the notion that I wanted to be a teacher. It was only very recently that I discovered my love of teaching (the pleasure of working with students, aside) probably came from my love of school supplies--crayons, paper, pens, pencils--all writing and artist's tools. But I digress.

One of my earliest memories of books (I'm guessing I was five or six) was reaching up and touching the spine of a book in the library and saying to myself: "I wonder how this person (who I did not identify as the writer/author) got their name on this book?" I also loved the smell of the card catalogue, the way the paper cards felt between my fingers, and reading the typed copy on the cards that said what the books were about. All traits, I would think, of a writer.

My first memory of reading's effect on me was on the playground of Cleveland Elementary School during recess. My sixth-grade class had been assigned to read a portion of *The Yearling* by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and I hadn't quite finished. I stood sobbing near the door of the school with the book open, reading about Jody's father telling him that he had to shoot the yearling. I asked myself: "How did this writer make me feel so sad about a boy who isn't real?" I

suppose this was my first writer's analysis of fiction.

But I was raised to want to be a wife and mother, so that took priority. While at a small teacher's college in a Chicago suburb, I became pregnant with my first and only child. It was at this critical crossroad in my young life – nineteen – that a teacher who read a poem of mine told me I should be a writer. I never forgot her words. Then, life, as they say, intervened. I got married and three years later my husband and father of my son died. For the next five years I taught “special education” to pay back my Illinois State Scholarship.

Then, by some twist of fate, when my required time was nearly over, I heard someone in the teacher's lounge talk about a job in publishing. I'd never heard of “publishing” before, but it intrigued me. I took a sabbatical from teaching and got a job at a prestigious educational publisher, Scott Foresman & Company. A job in two departments led to a position as editorial production liaison and eventually an editorial position. During my stint I also married my second husband and became a wife and stepmother to two more children.

Again, my writing and my own life were put on hold. Then, a few years ago, after nearly twenty-five years of marriage, my second husband succumbed to complications from a congenital heart condition. Finally, at fifty-nine I was on my own. I had the wind knocked out of me, but after the first year I found myself polishing and sending out stories. Presently, I am seeking representation for a novel manuscript, working title, *The Girl I Was*, which I began writing about two years before my husband's death. Three other novels are in various stages of invention. During this summer, I put up a tent in my yard to help me separate my writing life from the rest of my life. It's been an amazing experience.

Another love of mine has always been piano. About six months ago I started to take private lessons, which include music theory, an altogether new language for me. In two years, when I can take advantage of the senior rate at a nearby junior college, I plan to take pottery, sculpting, painting, and drawing classes to start. With new and old friends to support me, I feel I've been reborn--as an artist and writer.

Gayle Ann Weinstein has been published by Jane's Stories Press, Persimmon Tree online magazine, Lilith Magazine, and a video recording of a reading is forthcoming on the Story Club Magazine website. Gayle is currently seeking agent representation for her debut novel, The Girl I Was. Visit gayleannweinstein.net for updates.



Gayle and The Writing
Tent (2014)
[Photo by permission]

WOW!

Aka Women of Wisdom

Arlene Bernstein

I have a beautiful picture of my mother at the time of my parents' fiftieth anniversary...I like to remember her that way. After that, she retreated into a shrinking circumference of activity and eventually into the nether world of Alzheimer's. She was artistic, intuitive, probably psychic, but she never developed any of her gifts. I've always felt the responsibility to greet life with more openness and less fear than she had. So I've travelled widely, explored photography for the past fifty years, returning to painting after a forty-year hiatus, having my first one-person exhibition at the age of seventy. I lost two babies and growing through grief brought me to nature, the garden, meditation, a career as a therapist and writing a book, *growing season: life lessons from the garden*. My mother was always telling me to "stand up straight" and now that I've had a hip replacement and lower back issues, I am heeding her words... I am finally listening, and learning from the inside out what that means.

Enough about me: it's my women's group I want to tell you about.

Almost twenty-five years ago, Ellie and I began offering women's weekends, a kind of R and R with depth. Some years later, Ellie gathered a dozen friends together, most of whom had attended our weekends, to consider meeting regularly to discuss topics of concern. Whoever hosted picked the topic. Since we live in the Napa Valley, several had ties to the wine industry. Some were my friends; others, superficial acquaintances. Over time we became a support system when spouses died, and eventually a support system for each other as our members began to die. Interestingly it was the youngest, Pam, who passed away first... Our ages range now from sixty to eighty-eight. We've become each other's rooting sections as we bring our works to fruition.

Pat who died at sixty-eight was a public television producer. Her hobby was knitting. In the last years of her life she wrote a novel inspired by an antique jacket with a pomegranate design knitted of red silk and silver and gold threads from the Renaissance. She found it in Florence at

the Museo Stibbert. Ellie's unique vision and aesthetic has stayed alive and expressed itself through fifty years of raising a family and being available to the demands of her larger-than-life husband and his projects. Her journal entries became two published memoirs; her art is being shown in a retrospective at the Sonoma Museum of Art this year. And she's written a screen play which, when made into a movie she will direct, will make her the oldest woman first-time feature filmmaker ever. She also conceived of an installation entitled Circle of Memory, honoring children who have died, which has been exhibited in the U.S. and Europe. Robbie collaborated with her on Circle of Memory. She was a trained concert pianist who became a serious painter after she was widowed in her forties. She continues to experiment with new materials, and at eighty-one, still works in her studio all day every day. Her current exhibition in St. Helena is the most successful exhibition of her life.

Margrit was the gracious public relations face of her husband's winery, and after he died, she couldn't imagine a life apart from her husband's side. She had always painted menus for winery dinners, special bottles for auction, and she expanded her interests by attending watercolor workshops in Mexico. At one of them she met a fellow artist and they began a romance when she was eighty-six. She now exhibits her gorgeous watercolors. She's multilingual, and at eighty-eight is learning Russian. She has more energy than the rest of us put together! Moira was a journalist and a single mom who has written many books on issues of public interest and concern. Now in her early eighties, she's finally writing about her family and her closest friend who died mysteriously, stories from her heart. Molly has redesigned her garden at age eighty and created found object sculptures. She's been photographing and writing books about gardens and lifestyles, and creates amazing décor for events. Valeria, who grew up in Chile, has a science background that she's drawn on to plant acres of vineyard. She is always researching health-related issues, exploring spiritual paths and has written a charmingly illustrated book for her granddaughter.

Creative expression is a thread in all our lives, but we have learned from sharing how the proclivity was either nourished or squashed in our early years and those of us who were not encouraged have had to work our way back to self-trust in our abilities.



Gail Bien, Arlene Bernstein, Molly Chapeliet, Ellie Coppola, Margrit Mondavi, Moira Johnston Block, Robbie Frederick Deane (2014) [Photo by permission]