



Ellen Bass

"We are a community of those coming to speech from silence. This is an elementary fact we share—a history of illiteracy, suffocations, spiritual and literal, burnings of body and work, the weight of the unutterable surrounding all of our lives. And in no way can this shared history be separated from what we write today, nor from our love of each others' voices."

—Susan Griffin

Our love of each others' voices: this is, most essentially, what the Writing About Our Lives workshops that I facilitate are about.

We need to hear each others' words. It is still very recent in our history that we have been allowed the written word. For centuries women were denied access to literacy. We were excluded from schools. Those of us who did receive instruction (often in secret) were barred from publishing under our own names. And those of us who did publish often shaped our voices into acceptable modes. Even a major poet such as Muriel Rukeyser writing only a few decades ago subdued her lesbian perspective in order to be published. What would she—and others like her—have told us had they fully explored the themes most nourishing to them?

There are many huge areas of our lives which are still largely uncharted in literature. How many books do we have in which children are more than peripheral, in which the life of the one caring for small children is realistic? How many books do we have which center around friendship between women? And of these how many authentically depict the lives of women of color? How many portray the lives of prostitutes from our own perspective? Or prisoners? Or poor women supporting families? In how many books do we read of childbirth as more than a paragraph behind closed doors? Or old age? In how many do we read of the many aspects of women loving women which have sustained us throughout time?

In response to these questions, some of us can name a few books, some none; the avid and experienced searcher has found more. But for all of us the answer is "not enough." We are hungry for the mirror of words to be held up to our lives. We want to see ourselves, to know ourselves. We need this. In diverse ways, we are seekers looking for what our lives can mean, who we can become. We crave the validation of who we are, who we have been, as a foundation to support us as we venture further.

Women come to writing workshops such as the ones I facilitate out of need. One has a story she needs to tell—about the death of her son, or her work to alleviate child abuse, or the summer she sailed to Mexico. She has a story that wants expression and she senses that in the telling she will find both release and affirmation. And she hopes that in the telling she may offer something of value to another—though this hope is so precious and has been denied so vehemently and for so long that she may be afraid to recognize it. But it is there.

The Power of Women's Words

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Another needs to meet herself—or meet herself again. She recognizes that writing can be a way to understand her feelings, to find out what she thinks, what she chooses and what she must do. She is afraid. Or she is not afraid. Fear is irrelevant. She wants to know.

Another needs to create, to make. The words, the images, bang in her brain. She needs to order them, to form them. She comes to hear that this rattling she lives with can become a poem, a story, a book. Others, she suspects, have started with something more, something different, something better. She fantasizes their sentences flow onto the page effortlessly like the silvery trail of a snail. She hesitates to invest the time. She has a job or kids or a husband or a lover or all of the above. How will she fit this impractical, selfish necessity into her life?

She comes to find out how others have begun and how they have persevered. She comes to hear that the hours spent rearranging words on the page are not useless—that the work is demanding, can be frustrating and can be ecstatic. She remembers this from childhood, or from more recent times when she tried briefly, or from a dream when she wrote a whole poem and woke grasping just half a line.

She learns to carve the time out of her work, to close the door, unplug the phone. She faces the page, she faces her hands—her competence, her accumulated bits and pieces of living, her words—and she works.

Women come to writing workshops for many reasons. I believe in the power of words and I am awed by women's strength and courage, by what we have endured, what we have survived. This is a time in history, as our earth and our lives are threatened, that we need women's power.

Although our nurturing and sustaining qualities have been used against us (confining us to the kitchen, the nursery, or mopping up blood men have squandered in war),

those qualities, expanded to the planetary sphere, are desperately necessary today. Our earth needs nurturing. Her children are starving, her air and waters are polluted, her soil is poisoned, many species are already extinct. Chemicals banned in this country are sent in abundance to poorer nations. The bomb hangs heavy over us all—including the children.

This is what men have accomplished.

It is exceedingly fortunate, and probably not a coincidence, that women are discovering, creating and acknowledging our vast capacities at this time in history. Our influence, our attitudes, our perspective, our action have never been so necessary.

We are the ones who have carried, nourished and cared for life. Our energies and our talents have been directed toward keeping life going. In the past we've contended with weather, famine, disease and poverty, as well as the pride, greed and stupidity that led men to war. Now we are challenged with even greater threats. Our experience and our instincts are critical.

We must speak what we know—all of it. Our world has become so entangled in lies and destruction that we cannot yet tell what of our knowledge will prove important. Early in this wave of the women's liberation movement, we learned that "the personal is political," and this is true in the context of our writing. Each bit of personal writing is part of the entire map of our experience.

This is some of the exhilaration we feel at hearing each others' voices. What in our own thinking once seemed to us hopelessly private, of no interest to others—trivial, irrelevant—becomes illuminating, hilarious, devastating or empowering when shared with receptive listeners. And as we recognize how affected we are by the writing of others, we begin to trust the influence of our own.

In itself our story or poem cannot, of course, save the world. But in unison with every other woman's voice, our voice has both meaning and use. Our vast accumulation of understanding, of fury, of wisdom, of grief, of compassion, of laughter and delight is ours to draw upon. As Jan Veltman writes in "Song for Gathering Women," "we cannot afford/ to be anything but rich soil/for one another." □

Muse Papers

In Celebration of the Muse was the first reading series of local women writers in Santa Cruz. Our experience during the seven years we've been involved with poetry in Santa Cruz was that many readings have been organized by men and included only a few select women writers. An effective way of changing this imbalance, we felt, would be for women writers to unite and be heard.

The Santa Cruz women's writing community is large and multi-faceted. There are many writing classes taught by local women privately, as well as at Cabrillo and UCSC. Ellen Bass has taught Writing About Our Lives for many years in Santa Cruz and her classes have inspired a large number of women. Maude Meehan's classes are extremely popular. And there are women writing on their own and women writing for magazines and newspapers.

Yet we felt that the women writers were divided into groups that didn't intermesh and we wanted to create a broader sense of support. We brought together women writers from different life styles, different ethnic backgrounds and different degrees of literary experience. Some of the women were very familiar with reading. We also included women who were unpublished and had not read to a large group before.

We decided to keep the readings local. We knew about 20 writers, but, as the series started rolling, we put out publicity for other local writers to contact us. Eventually we came in touch with another 40 writers who submitted material from which we made a selection for the Fall series. Presently we've heard of a lot

more women writers and if we had the energy the series could continue easily through the spring. As it is we're taking a break. Patrice will continue the series next fall.

The original impulse behind the series came from Wilma Marcus, who a year ago suggested putting on a series of readings in conjunction with the National Festival of Women's Theater. This festival will take place in Santa Cruz in May of 1983 and will bring together local women and those nationally recognized.

For us it was extremely valuable and inspirational to hear the range of the writers' experiences. Some women who teach said they write only during the summer months when they have time. Others have strict daily schedules. Some said, "I write when I can and when it comes to me." It's interesting to note that for a number of women, the early morning is the best writing time (a few said it was evening, when the kids are asleep).

The audience was invited to ask the artists questions. Sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't, but what developed was an atmosphere of interest and of warmth. Many of the writers and audiences reported how encouraging this format was.

We're both poets and teach poetry in the schools. We both know how important it is for students not only to see their work in print but to share their work with others. Nearly all the writers who read said how important support groups had been to their writing.

One of the reasons we chose to organize In Celebration of the Muse was because we wanted to hear women's voices. We hope this series promoted to effort, courage and discipline it takes to be a writer. All of us shared ourselves and learned. Both of us feel stronger and more confident as writers and women.

—Patrice Vecchione and Gael Roziere