

CHALLENGE INTO CHANGE

2015 WRITING CONTEST



THE WOMEN'S INITIATIVE

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN TIMES OF CHALLENGE AND CHANGE

Challenge into Change
2015 Writing Contest



The Women's Initiative
1101 East High Street, Suite A
Charlottesville, VA 22902
www.thewomensinitiative.org
434.872.0047

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DEDICATION



To members of The Women's Initiative Board of Directors, past and present for their tireless service, commitment and vision.

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ABOUT THE WOMEN'S INITIATIVE



The Women's Initiative was founded in 2007 in Charlottesville, Virginia, in response to a profound community need for affordable mental health services for women. From the inception, our mission has been to provide effective counseling services, social support, education and outreach to empower women to transform challenging life situations into opportunities for renewed wellbeing and personal growth.

We believe every woman has an innate capacity for healing that, once uncovered and directed, results in better mental and physical health.

We serve area women who struggle with a range of mental health needs and who lack access to effective care due to factors such as race, ethnicity, economic disadvantage, sexual orientation or gender identity, illness, language, age and disability.

The conviction that all women should have access to vital mental health services animates the daily work of The Women's Initiative.

Please visit us at www.thewomensinitiative.org.



empowering women in times of challenge & change

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INTRODUCTION



*“Your truth may not look like mine, but
that is not what matters. What matters is
this: You can look at a scar and see hurt, or
you can look at a scar and see healing.”*

- Sheri Reynolds

A Gracious Plenty

The Challenge into Change writing contest is a labor of love for The Women’s Initiative and has become one of our most cherished programs. It allows us to move the agency’s work from the walls of our offices into a wider context and the greater community around us. It is a place where women’s stories can be told in their own voices, and serves to demonstrate the many ways our bodies, minds and souls can heal. As mental health professionals, we bear witness to transformation on a daily basis; however, we are always intrigued by the exponential power of storytelling as a vehicle for revolution and self-actualization for both the giver, and the receiver. This book is a chorus of voices raised to honor women who have triumphed against seemingly insurmountable odds with grace, clarity and spirit.

Using writing and storytelling to share news, to teach and to heal is as ancient as civilization itself. Reflecting this rich tradition, our authors use powerful poetry and prose to explore universal motifs such as grief & loss, health, and relationships. Furthermore, they confront many issues that are often rendered taboo, divisive, or too private to share. They do so with grace; not only to expurgate their own experiences, but to bring awareness to many issues that women in today’s society face. While abuse, mental health crises, poverty and domestic violence are not common conversation topics, they are common experiences that can only be eradicated when they are no longer secret. In their words, we find our wounds and wor-

ries, but most importantly, we find company on the road towards health and wholeness.

While the focus of each collection is on the healing power of storytelling, Challenge into Change has also become a venue for veteran and emerging writers alike to showcase their talents and to engage in creative exploration. Each of the stories in this volume represents untold hours of reflection and effort. The submissions were judged by an independent panel that looked for writing that had emotional resonance and clearly communicated how its subject manifested change out of a challenging life situation. The panel also honored stories that effectively used language to convey meaning, and had the power to motivate and encourage others. Although not every entry wins an award, the judge's comments reflect the unique gifts each piece offers us.

Challenge into Change is much more than a collection of inspirational stories. It is a blueprint for resilience and perseverance. It is a safe and sacred platform from which we can bear witness and give name to the many challenges women continue to face in our increasingly complex society. It is also a beacon: to those women who have yet to find the right place or right time to share their stories, we hope that this collection will lend solace and courage. As you read this volume, I invite you to tap into this richness and participate in the transformative process. Within these pages, there are a number of discoveries to be made, sometimes in the shadows, but more often in the many instances of sharing and connection.

Eboni Bugg, LCSW
Community Programs Director

The Lost Child

Elizabeth D. Gagne

First Place

*Such a beautiful story of self-discovery and compassion. ❖
What a beautiful tribute to a beautifully complex woman.
Your essay reminds us of the healing our histories hold. ❖
With strong diction and vivid example your essay celebrates the
power of understanding as a pathway to forgiveness and
reconciliation. ❖ The specific details in your writing make the
woman's story vivid and compelling. The dates provide a sense
of time and of how generations, and our own lives, can change if
we can be open to the experiences of others who have also
suffered.*

My paternal Grandmother, Marna, was born August 7, 1916 in Ordway, CO. Most of my life I knew very little of her childhood. I knew she was essentially orphaned at 2 and sent to live with her father's older sisters in West Texas. Her father and brother were in and out of her life but never part of her everyday security. As a child my perception of Marna was of a cold and distant woman. She was not the cuddly, climb in your lap Grandmother – children were to be seen and not heard.

In 1997 I took my 6 year old son to Austin to see her one last time. In trying to create conversation with his Great Grandmother she looked at me and in the sweetest voice said, "I never really understood children." With that simple statement I felt an instant softening in my heart for this woman. It wasn't that she didn't love her grandchildren but that she didn't know how to connect to a child. I used that revelation to look at my childhood thru different eyes, looked at my own Father differently, having been raised by a woman who didn't understand children. For 19 years I continued to work on my own life with this knowledge of where I come from guiding me, but there was more to learn.

While visiting family last year I spent an evening with my cousin. He and his brother had spent the first 10 years growing up in West Texas near Marna and Granddaddy. I knew through a genealogy search that her Mother was actually Mexican and not Basque as she'd claimed through my life, a detail that meant very little to me until that night.

I learned that in Marna's childhood racism was prevalent in West Texas. Whether real or perceived she felt the need to hide the truth of her maternal heritage and because of her Irish father her complexion allowed her to 'pass'. Yes... sadly I said Pass. What a weight for a small child, shame, fear of discovery, isolation, how it molded her as a child, essentially stripping her of the innocence of childhood.

My Grandfather fell in love with this beautiful wounded woman. They created a life in that same town, had children and survived war surrounded by wonderful friends and family. They had costume parties and played Bridge. There was fun and laughter and life and creativity. As I listened to his stories I saw Marna as a young woman, overcoming so much but still a scared child inside.

Learning about my Grandmother has allowed me to face my own childhood fears and pain and find my own child within to love, accept and protect. I hold her dearer in my heart now, a lost child who had lost the innocence to understand children. My Father's Mother.

In years to come I hope my own son and granddaughter will find that moment when they can see me with different eyes. As more than the age that I was when they met me.

I Lost My Twin Sister to Breast Cancer

Sheila S. Boling

Second Place (tie)

Your engaging literary voice makes it easy for the reader to experience the void, to mourn the loss of a sister gone too soon. But even as we experience the loss, we celebrate the life, the light that Lisa shared with others. We speak her name because the light of her being endures, in your words and in her own. ❖ I was moved to tears when reading this. A powerful testimony of transforming loss into faith and meaning. ❖ Your inspirational piece reveals the power of faith to keep alive those who have passed. It is more than an elegy; it is a celebration of human generosity. ❖ Knowing that you ran the Women's 4-miler on your sister's behalf makes your own transformation through pain a reality for your readers.

My name is Sheila and I was born with a twin sister, Lisa. For 35 years we did what twin sisters do: we lived our lives together and separately. Then when we were in our mid to late twenties, Lisa found a lump on a self-breast exam. She went to the doctor and was diagnosed with malignant breast cancer. She had a mastectomy with reconstruction. All the time, Lisa never stopped living. And happily, the cancer was in remission and every day was a blessing.

Four and half years later the cancer was back, now having spread to other parts of her body. But Lisa never quit fighting, she was determined that “cancer” was not going to define who she was. But I was angry.

I knew she wasn't going to get better, but I prayed each day. God, please let her live to see our birthday, God let her live to Thanksgiving, God please let her live another day. I will always remember one particularly beautiful Indian summer day, the Saturday before she died. She was walking around the house without her oxygen and feeling good, smiling wearing her blue floral silk pajamas.

God did answer my prayers: Lisa died 2 days after our 35th birthday. But this wasn't how it was supposed to be. We were supposed to be there for each other, grow old together, and protect each other. I just couldn't imagine her not being there. When she died, I lost my one true friend. It has been 16 years and this hole in my heart feels like it will never close.

Her death changed me in so many ways: I faced fears I never admitted to, summoned strength I didn't know I had and her death made my faith in God stronger. All I needed to do was to lean and depend on him. He would see me through and answer my prayers.

Recently my nephew (her son) found her journal. In it she had written letters to each of us. One journal entry spoke about her telling "her journey" to people in the churches. She wanted to be able to help someone else. I joined Sisters Conquering Cancer so I could tell my story and hers. In doing this, I am her voice.

Since her death, I have begun to feel her spirit. Sometimes I dream about her and it brings me peace. I'm a stronger person now. She was with me on the Women's 4-Miler, laughing and cheering me on. I have been moved to join boards to learn more about cancer, and I reach out to those who feel alone while a loved one, family member or friend is going through treatment. Hopefully, if I can help someone else, then Lisa's legacy lives on through me.

Losing a Person

Judith Hannah Weiss

Second Place (tie)

Such a moving portrait of how life can change on a dime. Thank you for your willingness to share such a powerfully emotional journey. ❖ Your writing catalogues the journey of recovery after a life altering accident. It shows how with patience, pluck and hope, change can occur. ❖ The pace, the rhythm, the song in this piece displays true literary skill and passion. Your writing is a powerful chronicle of what is lost and what is gained when one works to overcome tragedy. Beautiful writing and message. ❖ These dated “briefs” from the mind of a brain-injured person are powerful, simple and moving. Not a single word is excessive; your writing expresses keen economy and lucid honesty.

Day one, hour one:

I am strapped on a board. I can't move my head or neck. I can't move my legs or arms. I hear beeping, beeping, beeping. Beeping means someone's alive.

Day one, hour ten:

I hear slurred words in a tongue I used to speak. Maybe the voice is mine.

Day three:

I see a face looking upside-down at me. Tired eyes, wild dark hair, green scrub shirt. I ask if he is an angel, he smiles, says his name is John.

Day five:

A million miles away, a voice asks me to say my name. I can say my name. Can I say my address? No. I repeat my name instead.

Month two:

I am in Brain Training. The leader shows us a shiny notebook and says it's our new best friend.

My new friend is shiny red. The leader tells us to turn a page. We're in the group that can do that.

Best friends have covers and tell us stuff we used to know.

Month five:

I was a head writer once. I am head injured now.

Month seven:

I survived Time, Life, Fortune, Money, Vogue, Vanity Fair. Icons and editors known for killer looks and killer deadlines, delivered while dressed to kill.

Then I got smashed by a drunk with a truck.

Month eight:

Our home is sold to pay the bills. Movers I can't recall pack boxes I can't recall for a trip I can't recall to a planet I don't know.

Month nine:

Head injured and from another planet is quite a combination. I don't know if it's time to make hay or stack wood and I can't do either.

Month ten:

I live alone at the edge of the world. My new address doesn't show on GPS and is off the Google grid. Where I am does not exist and where I was – has disappeared.

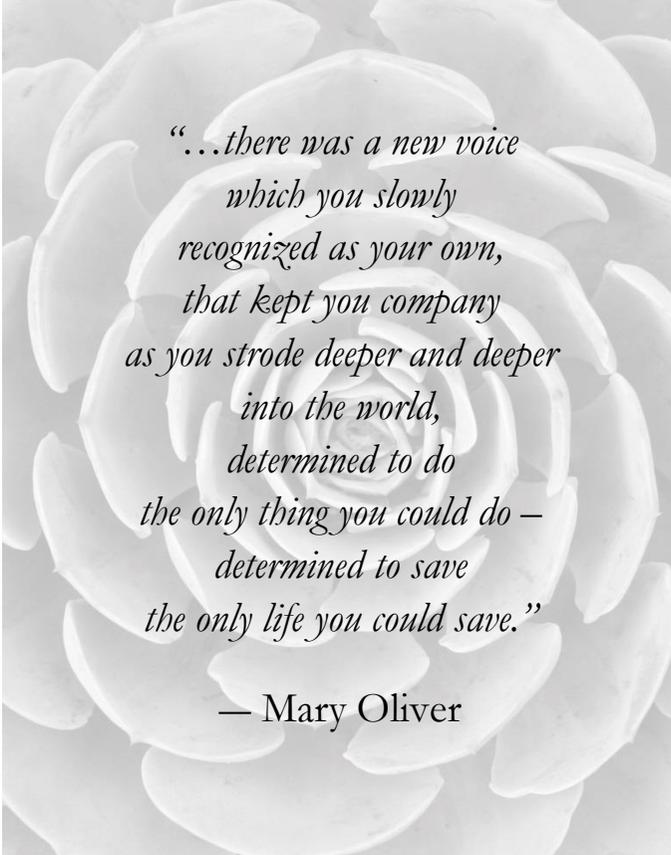
Month eleven:

You know those weight-loss commercials where someone proudly shows you the pants they used to wear when they were, say, twice their current size.

They say, “I lost a whole person.” So did I.

Year one, month one:

I wake to a world of wings. A twig, a bud, a branch, a song. This world is theirs, this endless sky, this fledgling learning how to fly.



*“...there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.”*

— Mary Oliver

A Rose Is Still a Rose

Myra Anderson

Third Place

A masterful display of poetic language. Your gut-wrenching essay reminds us it is important to protect our “roses,” especially after they have been trampled and abandoned; only then will they be able to once again “evoke RESLIENCY & BEAUTY.” ❖ With powerful diction and brave testimony, your essay celebrates the power to overcome adversity and prevail. ❖ Your images allow the reader to relate to the emotions being discussed. By using an extended metaphor, the image of the rose itself expresses life and beauty. ❖ A powerful testimony of resilience and faith. The rose as a metaphor shows the beauty of transformation and empowerment.

Life can come to a complete standstill after a traumatic experience like sexual abuse & rape. It happened this way for me.

Fear, GUILT, shame & humiliation were like traffic jams of atrocity, overshadowing the best parts of who I was, and leaving me BROKE DOWN in confusion, UNCERTAINTY & pain & unsure of which direction to try to go in. I became completely OVERWHELMED by the pitter-patter, tap-tap knocking of my emotions, TRIGGERED by an image, a noise, a touch, a smell or even a single word. I felt like a rose that was desperately trying to survive and grow, yet surrounded only by cold, hard, concrete.

Every fiber of my soul felt VIOLATED in ways words cannot accurately express. This HORRENDOUS experience remained embedded in me, yet almost in disbelief; disbelief because the violation was inflicted by a thief - a thief because the sweet fragrance of my rose was never his to partake.

All I had was PAINFUL memories, break-dancing in my soul & annihilating my mind. Memories rooted in post-traumatic stress,

NIGHTMARES, flashbacks, depression, low self-esteem, self-injury, suicide attempts & constant TRIGGERS; all reminding me of the assassination upon my innocence, womanhood, & peace of mind. I felt the only thing left for me to do was put soil all over my face, in sheer utter disgrace of the atrocity.

But just when I felt all hope was GONE, I looked down & there lied a salient ROSE. This mere ROSE gave me an instant revelation, that the dirty soil I put on my face in disgrace, is the exact same soil used in producing NEW harvest. With this healing revelation, I decided not focus on soiled dirt, but rather EMBRACE the transforming rejuvenation coming forth from underneath the ground. This revelation was nurtured further by therapy, supports groups, friends, exercise, medication, mediation, & prayer. I no longer fixated on the fact that the rose bushes had prickly thorns, but rather RE-JOICE because thorn bushes had beautiful sweet roses.

Although today I still struggle, there's a much bigger part of me that's continues to PERSEVERE despite it all - because the rose, its thorns, & the soil are ALL remarkable testament that difficulty, heartache & pain can evoke RESILIENCY & BEAUTY. It's been documented, that a rose had in fact GROWN from the cracks in HARD concrete, proving many of nature's laws wrong. Long LIVE the rose that grew from concrete when no one thought it could. Long LIVE the trauma survivor, who was DEVASTATED but not DEFEATED.

The ROSE is a true symbol of my life. Not only as a testament of mere survival but also of HOPE. In spite of all the difficulties I've had in life, the rose has ENRICHED me immensely; and given me STRENGTH that I didn't even know existed within me. I sincerely believe it doesn't matter what one has endured in life, a ROSE is STILL & always will be a ROSE, and NOTHING, absolutely NOTHING can take away her BEAUTY.

List of Authors

Budoor Abdullah
Aerial
Bridget Onion Aleshire
Myra Anderson
Whitney Austin
Bev
Sheila S. Boling
Jessica Carter
Annette Cashatt
Lori D'Angelo
Lindsay Heider Diamond
Marian Dixon
Eileen
Isabel Esplin
Sabrina Eubanks
Kamila FNU
Elizabeth D. Gagne
Sarah Ginty
Hansie Haier
Nancy Hatschbach
Renée Hughes
Caslynn Jackson
Mary Elizabeth
Pat Morris
Cindy Noonan
Phlawlissflow
Emilie Raymond
Celina Marann Santana
Lisa Updike
Victoria Walbroehl
Judith Hannah Weiss
Alice Williams

Transforming challenging life circumstances into positive growth and change is what this volume celebrates and hopes to inspire.



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