

One Day, One Night at a Time

WOMEN WRITE OF POVERTY, HOMELESSNESS, AND HOPE

**Members of
The Gathering Place**



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Printed in the United States of America, by Lightning Source, Inc.

ISBN 978-1-937862-38-1

Library of Congress Control Number 2013904597

Published 2013 by BookCrafters, Parker, Colorado.

SAN-859-6352, BookCrafters@comcast.net

<http://self-publish-your-book.com>

Title *One Day, One Night at a Time* taken from “The Whisper of the Wind” by Peg Butler
Artwork in *One Day, One Night at a Time* is by women in the Writers’ Group

Cover art by Sharon Kumm

Copies of this book may be ordered from www.bookcrafters.net and www.tgpdenver.org



Dedication

*To all who share the experiences of homelessness and poverty
and to those who may still be searching for their voice.*

Introduction

For people who are experiencing homelessness and poverty, there are few opportunities for creative expression. Creativity is relegated to the place of luxury – only accessed after the work has been done. And for this group of people, the work is seldom done. Living in poverty is in and of itself, hard work. Housing and food need to be secured; medical and mental health care accessed. School, employment or some kind of regular income must be obtained, and transportation to appointments coordinated. Understanding and meeting the requirements of a complicated and often disjointed system is exhausting. In 1986, The Gathering Place was founded as a safe place where women and children would receive assistance in this hard work and where they might find community and hope as they navigated life's challenges.

Our members, or those we serve, come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Their education level ranges from hardly any to those with advanced degrees. They live on the street, in shelters, and in their own homes. They represent all races and ethnicities, come from stable homes and the borrowed homes of foster care. Many are victims of family violence; some have mental illness; some have been incarcerated. Yet we share a common humanity that brings us together as we identify our strengths and struggles and our hopes and dreams.

Each day our members choose from an array of possibilities designed to offer choice and promote positive relationships. Three meals a day and “the coffee pot on” create opportunities for informal friendships, as well as access to nutrition. Mothers with children work together on finding resources for themselves and their families. Those seeking education use computers and attend classes that support adult learning. Collaborations with other organizations result in easier access to medical care, mental health care, and housing. Hundreds of volunteers ensure that our members are surrounded by people from the community who want to connect with others and be a part of the solution to homelessness. Haircuts, showers, and clothing help renew self-worth. The Thursday Writers' Group is one of our many programs and is the source of the writings in this book.

The Gathering Place has always valued self-expression and over the years we have learned that stories can be told in many voices. Writing, visual art, fiber arts, and various music programs have all provided forums for storytelling and for moving out of the shadows and into the light. Art, in all its forms, allows us to find meaning in our experiences. Sharing our art can give others a glimpse into what we value and how we feel.

As the world has evolved to one where we value a sense of life balance, we still seem to have an expectation that people who are living in poverty should be constantly working earnestly on getting out and achieving the great dream of economic stability. For women, children, and people who are transgendered, The Gathering Place has been a refuge where that dream has not been separated from the context of individual lives. Recognizing that each person has a history and a story that has led to her current situation, it has always been our goal to listen and learn and to honor the story and the storytelling. By encouraging creativity in writing and other art forms, our members can tap into new or lost strengths and find both the skills and the energy necessary to face each day, “One Day, One Night at a Time.”

Leslie R. Foster
President & CEO
The Gathering Place

Preface

The Gathering Place opens its arms to women in many wonderful ways, but one small class defies easy description, for this is where members often find pathways directly to their truth.

Some rush in, bursting with words that start to pour out as soon as pen hits paper; others can't find an easy track from head to hand so stay in quiet reflection until the secrets of their hearts begin to seep out. A few just sit and think, free for a while from the spin of a world gone awry. All visibly relax as they enter an emotional zone where anything is possible. They have arrived in Writers' Group, where armor cracks and healing begins.

A class that arose from a wish became a book that evolved from a dream, a desire that healing words venture beyond a classroom to journey into the world. For seven years, this group of ever-changing participants has met weekly to tell tales and seek pathways, generating over a thousand poems, stories, letters, and essays along the way. We who serve as facilitators offer encouragement, gentle guidance, and positive feedback, knowing these pieces are not intended to be exercises in literary perfection but to speak the language of the heart. Tears fall, hugs happen, and a cleansing emerges as the women come to understand that their experiences are singular but not unique to them.

Although often reticent at first, the writers soon find their own voices, deciding which parts of their lives to reveal and examining feelings as they spill onto paper. They learn to trust both their instincts and each other by writing and sharing hidden parts of their lives. Long-buried secrets shrink in the light, losing their fraudulent power; courage and hope replace anger and humiliation. Inspired by the truth of others, writers come to believe that their own struggles can be surmounted and that their voices are powerful and valid.

Some write only a few sentences, others dash off pages. Poetry, the art whose complexity defies containment, has emerged as the genre of primary choice for many, because it's less complex to craft

in simple form yet has the ability to speak profoundly with a few carefully-chosen words. Since most writers don't have computer access, we type each piece and return it so they can see their words transfer from a written scrawl to a legitimate piece of literature. An important part of our process is to give the women assistance with their writing skills along the way, but the final decisions on content and language are always theirs; therefore, the pieces submitted were ultimately edited only for spelling and punctuation.

The collected writings of women who live on the edge of society's systems—in shelters, on the streets, in warrens of subsidized apartments—bring a simple eloquence to complex histories. We invite you to move beyond your comfort zone as you read the raw and arduous stories contained within these pages. Be also prepared to have a heart-opening, spirit-lifting experience as you enter a world that may exist far beyond your knowing. These women are survivors—determined, courageous, and eternally hopeful as they work to once again find solid ground. May their honest words allow you to see the world through other eyes and bring visibility to invisible lives.

Kirsten Morgan and Suzanne Burm

Acknowledgments

The essence of The Gathering Place is our sense of community and connectedness. We impact each other in all ways and hence, our greatest accomplishments are shared. Indeed, this book would not have happened without the profound support of many.

Our thanks to the Board of Directors who didn't even flinch when we proposed in our annual business plan that this year we "write a book." Their belief in and support of our organization makes all things possible.

Thanks to The Gathering Place staff who encourage people to attend the Writers' Group and provide the resources and support that allow our members to recognize their strengths. We are so proud that some of the writing within acknowledges this kindness.

Our heartfelt thanks to all of our volunteers who make The Gathering Place a safe place to be and to take risks; where countless people are available because they want to be, not because they are paid to be. Kirsten and Suzanne stand high among them. Thank you both for believing in the writers and for your patience and guidance throughout this remarkable journey.

Thanks to our editors and publishers, Joe and Jan, who gave us hope, a vision, and the technical experience we needed to realize our dream.

Finally, and most importantly, thank you to the members of The Gathering Place with whom we share our lives, our stories, and our inspiration.

Quiet

Leticia D. Tanguma

Away from “fitting in.”
Away from “majority rule.”
Away from annoying or threatening traffic.

Away to breathe.
To co-exist with kindred spirits,
To laugh, write, share, listen.

I made it to Writers’ Group
With a sigh of relief
This Thursday afternoon.

Here I want to live.

Here I dream of the future.

Here I have hope.

Courage

BJ

I meet many courageous people every day. What one sees as hardship, another sees as opportunity. We have an opportunity to make choices every day—but will I remember 10 years from now which of my choices got me there? Do I remember 10 years? Only in little chunks.

Time can be boxed—boxes are to open, one at a time. When I don't like what's in my box, I put it back in. I think I need more courage to take it out of the box and turn it around so I can really see it. Why are boxes such a big deal to my family—my kids and grandkids? Because they can hold anything, or maybe because they are so versatile.

Surprises can come in boxes—the best surprise I ever gave was two large, wrapped and ribboned boxes to my kids at Christmas when I thought I had nothing to give. But the empty boxes held dreams that poured out in abundance as my kids played with them year after year.

How odd. Sometimes I am scared to open my own boxes, but I don't mind giving empty ones to my kids—odd—funny-odd—and that gives me courage to open my own because, I remind myself, if only I will really look, I can turn my things over and see them from a different perspective, and suddenly they don't have the same hold on me.



Leticia D. Tanguma

My Experience With Crying

Essie Mae Thomas

One night I sat crying and crying.
It started with just my thinking,
going back in my past. So, then I began
crying and crying. There's really nothing
wrong with crying. I don't care

who you are, where you've been,
rich or poor, even the color of your skin;
all of our blood is red. Doesn't matter
how much money you've lost. Perhaps
you've lost a loved one—husband, wife,
child, niece, nephew, even your best friend.

We all have lost something.
But whatever the reason for your crying,
it's cleansing. You may have held something in
or even held a grudge. You held that thing
in so long until now you are crying.
So what I say to you today is
it's OK for your crying.

Two Women

eb

They sit in a corner,
squatting figures
on a floor

in a room full of women.

If you didn't know them,
you wouldn't notice

how happy and content

they seemed,

faces aglow, smiling,
catching up on the latest.

To anyone else,
these women might seem
insignificant,
but they are happy
because
they have made it.

Small hurdles.

They are reunited after a time
apart.

Last time they saw each other
was a cold, harsh day

when both were helpless and
uncertain of what the next day
would bring.

Neither knew what the next step
would be.

That was six months ago.

Today, things look different for them.
Last time one woman was bound
by an abusive relationship,
the other had only her car
to live in.

Now. Today
they smile.

To anyone else,
this is elementary.

These are small steps,
but today is special.

Today spells freedom.

It is special because they share
a common bond,
a holy fire; they have jumped
a hurdle.

This is a women's homeless shelter.
They see the hordes of women
come into the place,

holding everything they own,
some looking bewildered.

they know the feeling;
they have been there.

But today is truly special,

because today,
they are blessed;

they have each other.

Magic Soup

Paula Cordier

Five children are stranded in a cabin deep in the wilderness, while snow builds up outside, almost reaching the tops of the windows. Darkness has fallen and the howls of starving wolves echo and reverberate through the too-thin walls as they circle around, looking for a way in.

Supplies are running low. The oldest child, a girl, sighs heavily as she looks through barren cupboards and finally opens the fridge. Eggs, but no milk. The younger ones are hungry.

They ate the last two cans of Spaghettios earlier, the big sister carefully spooning even amounts into every bowl but hers. She can go without a few spoons when it comes to her beloved siblings.

The youngest two, boys, look up at her with worried eyes. “It’s okay,” she reassures them. “I saved the best meal for last. A wizard gave me the recipe, so it’s magic!”

The big sister starts the water boiling on the stove while her brothers look on. After adding the secret ingredients and saying some magic words, she cracks the eggs into the pot one by one as she stirs carefully, letting her brothers take a turn.

After sitting them down at the table and serving up their magic soup, her two little brothers look down at it dubiously. The other two girls don’t say a word as they slurp theirs down. After more coaxing, the boys give in too, their growling tummies and child’s belief in magic giving way.

A single space heater heats up the living room where they’ll bed down for the night. Blankets are laid down in the middle of the floor, where the five kids will lie helter skelter, curling up into one another for warmth, with more blankets piled on top.

The wind whistles through loose windowpanes and doorjambs, giving them all a fright. The oldest girl starts weaving adventurous tales for them all to get lost in, her soothing voice making them feel safe and secure as they snuggle closer.

The oldest child is fiercely protective of them. They belong to her. She's the one who wipes their tears and kisses them better, the one who tells them stories, and makes up games for them to play. She's the one they look up to for protection. She's their big sister, after all.

A key in the lock as the doorknob turns. Their real mother is back. Everything the big sister has done unravels in seconds as her brothers and sisters jump up excitedly. "Mama, Mama," they all cry out. The oldest child stands back, the betrayal of their joy piercing her heart.

The world swims into clearer focus. The house is unkempt, with clothes and toys scattered about haphazardly. The snow outside is gone, the sound of the wolves replaced by the sound of cars driving past their house.

The happy reunion takes away the adventure magic until next time their mother leaves them all alone. For hours or days—the girl is too young to know the concept of time. The oldest sister knows only that she lives for those times when she is her sisters' and brothers' everything. When they belong to her, and her alone.

Light Upon the Lightness

Sharon Kumm

I wanted to light upon the lightness,
the unseen, by writing. Hear me
calling—the depth that I’ve seen and
sunk into, heard and shimmied up to.
Is that why they call it understanding,
because it comes from below?

I kissed his meaning, but I wanted more
of a touch beneath my feet—in the grass
of the unmanifest, where my eyes saw, and
my ears too, the atoms moving slowly.

Widen my grasp, narrow my fear of being
absolutely alone here. My home no longer
mine—trails of lives here, disappearing
in the dusk. Is there dust
when the sun goes down?

In my turning, when I felt the butterfly
opening of peace and beauty,
what was it—I still felt unfinished—
but the signs were there, the growing
being in the mirror, the parts of me—
my mind and body recognizing
a desire for homelessness.



Micole L. Lane

The Babies Were Happy to Leave

BJ

Grease-smudged, smiling faces,
Water at a premium
Grubby hands reach out,
Waiting for the world to fall into them.
Bright eyes flash under smoke-infused hair,
Taking in new sights
While noses tingle with new smells.

Stern eyes fall upon them, empty eyes
Filling with disgust before
Swilling full of pointed anger.
“Heathens! Unclean! Like wild animals!”
The words slam against baby ears
Not yet able to understand their meaning.
Smiles waver, eyes dim, noses sense danger.

Spirits recoil from the icy blast of contempt.
Pristine white sheets, clean towels,
New clothes shoved into tiny arms,
Becoming a heavy burden to babies
Marked forever with ugly memories
That will be theirs for a lifetime,
While tiny hearts quietly cry for Mama.

Tunkasila, who were these people
Who taught us to hate,
To hate ourselves and each other
At such a tender age?
To hate, so we can be clean and white
And civilized, just like them.
The babies were so happy when they left...

I am here to reclaim them.
I come with tenderness and love
To wrap them in my arms,
Filling them with comfort and peace,
To return their memories to them
Of lifetimes past, with their strong
Lakota mothers, their families, their Tiyospayes.

Tunkasila, bless all the babies
So their hearts will heal,
So they can smile again, knowing
They come from a fierce
And noble people, a red-skinned people,
A proud people, knocked down only for a time.
The babies will be happy to come home.

To Feel Like I'm a Person

Kim Holder

Thought after thought—
speed thinking and speed walking.
From Greyhound to Sinclair
to public toilets, churches, shelters,
Starbucks, restaurants.
Paper towels off the floor,
flushing and cleaning the sink,
making the trash compact.

Serving.

Cleaning hundreds of bathrooms.
Homeless for five years,
cleaning the toilet was something
I'd do if I had a home.

Every single bathroom I entered
was a sparkling palace
when I left it. I wanted productivity
and cleanliness; I wanted to serve
others and I needed to have something
to do that was like housekeeping,
like having a home.

Serving others,
and feeling like
a person.

Black Box

Leticia D. Tanguma

My words are unspoken
but alive in a dance from yesterday,
hopping in a black box theatre,
swirling on a painted floor,
resonating with rhythm and beat.

Words that waited for dance
too long in a little apartment,
in a broken down car or
on a crowded bus, smelling
like urine, cigarette smoke and dust,
or in line at the food bank.

But yesterday morning the words
came alive through dance and
exploring unlimited possibilities,
breaking presumptions of age and ability
with ironic twist and inspirational turns
within the black box.



Sharon Kumm

Freezing
Jennie K. Foster

I saw a lady
by the road
in a wheelchair,
freezing.

I went home
and got her a coat.

I felt pain
that she sat there,
needing something.
She didn't hold a sign;
she just sat there,
freezing.

Lost

C.M. Davidson-Sole

I've lost money, cars, oh my stars,
I've lost my place to live;
lost freedom, time, I've lost my mind,
my faith, my hope, my gifts.
I've lost my shape, I've lost my teeth;
I put them on the shelf.
Vision, hearing, friends disappearing,
my job, oh yeah, my wealth.
Days, weeks, months and years, I think
I lost my stride. No privacy or dignity;
the inner me has died.
I've lost my goal, my roll, my soul
and my emotions too. My health,
my tears, but not my fears.
I think they've multiplied.

Happiness, peace and harmony, oh gee!
My life's a mess. I've lost my temper,
balance and youth, plus
all my interests.

I've lost some toys and some boys,
I've lost some interviews. Some men,
my pen, my socks, my thoughts, and yes,
my point of view.

Lost my glasses and some classes,
and some poems too. Lost my insight
and an invite, lost a couple of screws.

Although I've lost a lot of stuff, I'll
keep on plodding and fight
the good fight here on earth
until my days are through.

How to Come Up With the Rent Money

Elizabeth Vonaarons

It's Monday, June 13th. I have managed to pay \$295 of my monthly rent payment, which is \$635. This leaves a balance due of \$340, which was actually due on June 5th. Last month, May, 2011, the Senior Resource Center helped me pay half of my rent, but that was only a one-time occasion. What to do?

I check with The Gathering Place. They say they will help me with rent for the new place that I had applied to and was accepted. However, I will not be able to move in until August. Since I am not homeless, she cannot help me with my June rent.

So, I get out the handy resource list and call. First, I call Access Housing, between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m., Monday through Thursday. The phone message says they have funds available and someone will call me back. The second day, I hear from Access Housing. They have federal monies for rental assistance and one of the requirements is to take a twelve-week course about finding jobs.

"Can you do that?" the woman on the phone asks.

"Well, OK, yes I can," I say.

I then go over to DenUM (Denver Urban Ministries). They do not have any funds available, but St. Paul Lutheran Church may have funds. Go there between 2:00 and 4:00 because there is a lottery drawing. I go to St. Paul's and get there at 1:45. People are waiting for the doors to open. There is a family there with two small children. The doors open right at 2:00.

I draw lottery number 17 and the lady sitting at my table draws number 14. Since they start with number 1, we are probably not going to be seen by anyone that day. That turns out to be the case but the good news is they have a very nice lunch set up for us. We thank them for the nice lunch.

At 4:00, they announce that this is it for Tuesday but we are welcome to come back for the drawing again on Thursday afternoon. It turns out that Cindy, the lady sitting at my table, is diabetic. Cindy went to the church to ask for monies for her prescriptions. She had to make a decision between filling her prescriptions and getting food. Her food stamp program was in the process of renewing, so she was without food stamps. Food won over prescriptions, so Cindy had been without medication for two months.