

# ***Making History***

how to remember, record, interpret and share  
the events of your life

by  
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## Preface

# Why I Wrote This Book

**“There is no agony like bearing  
an untold story within you.”**

*Zora Neale Hurston*

I've always been fascinated by stories. Not surprising, given my upbringing. My mother read me storybooks long before I could talk. She taught me to read for myself by the age of three. She encouraged me to put on little plays and skits dramatizing the stories I read. She was always an enthusiastic audience.

My father is a natural born storyteller with a gift for making the most trivial happening seem dramatic, funny or exciting. One of my favorite pastimes was to listen to him tell stories of “the old days.” So vivid were his stories that I was more familiar with my grandparents, aunts and uncles as young adults and children, rather than the adults I actually knew.

After dinners at our large tribal gatherings on Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July, while my cousins and brothers ran playing and screaming around the house, I was usually hiding under the dinner table listening to the adults talk. Because I was hidden by the long white tablecloth, they didn't know I was there, and freed from the inhibition “not in front of the children!” they would tell the *real* stories of their lives. Beer, wine and scotch would be poured, and sex and death and scandal would ricochet around the table. Long standing jokes would be resurrected and laughed over again. Speculation and opinions about old family mysteries would be offered up and argued over. Politics, religion, history and wars: no topics were taboo. Since my family was filled with loud, passionate people, the stories tended to be juicy.

My eavesdropping habits, which I must confess I never outgrew, have stood me in good stead in my work as a writer. Especially since I not only write my own stories, but help others to write theirs as a personal historian.

I also teach memoir writing, and in 2001, I proposed such a class to a local community college, for their Senior continuing education program. But they turned me down. They already had a writing class. However, they said, we notice you have a degree in history – we could use a history class, so could you teach that?

I did not want to teach History. For one thing, my degree in History was granted in 1971, thirty years before! Not only did I not want to teach it, I didn't think I could. But I did want to teach at this Senior program, because, selfishly, I viewed it as a good way to get my name out there as a personal historian.

So reluctantly I agreed to teach a History class — but a history class with a difference. I proposed I teach people to see their own individual lives *as history*. Most of us tend to see “History” as something that happens *to* us. But the truth is that we ourselves, each of us, contribute to and participate in history. We are actors, not just reactors.

I developed a system, part history lesson, part memoir writing, to help people discover their place in history, and share their discoveries with others. The class, “You Make History,” has been a wonderful success. Everyone who takes the class loves it. *I* love it. I hear great stories. It is hiding under the Thanksgiving dinner table all over again.

I also got to tell *my* stories. I asked the participants in my classes to “spill their guts,” and I knew I had to be willing to do the same. So I participated in class, sharing my memories from my own personal history. When I taught the decades 1930 through 1959, I thought I wouldn't have much to say. After all, I was born in 1949. I was wrong! I discovered my child's perspective, which is every bit as valuable as an adult's. I remembered old family stories. I reconnected with my parents and saw them in roles other than parental, as the children and young adults they once were.

The class I didn't want to teach turned out to be one of the greatest gifts I have ever been given. It is my hope that this book will be such a gift for you.

## Part One

# Why Tell Your Stories?

**“Remember what you have seen,  
for everything forgotten  
returns to the circling winds.”**

*Navajo proverb*

## Chapter One

# Your Life Matters

Many participants in the class “You Make History” have remarked that their children or grandchildren are pestering them to “write it down!” But as one of them said, “I don’t have time to remember my life – I’m still too busy living it!”

It is a daunting endeavor to write down thirty, fifty, eighty years of living. It is often an overwhelming task just to remember it! But take heart – you don’t have to tell it *all* to convey a sense of who you are and what is important to you. You can write short vignettes, or a series of short stories, or a segment of your life, or a book on just one important issue. This book explains a system to help you remember and do just that.

Many of us think we will write our memoirs – someday. Maybe if we do something fabulous, outrageous, something that alters the course of history. Maybe if we become famous. Or maybe just when we have the time, whenever that will be. But few of us ever get around to it. And the truth is that if you don’t preserve your stories – what you did, what you thought, what you felt, what you witnessed – then your stories will die when you do. No one else can tell them like you can. No one else has your eyes, your heart or your mind.

“Well so what?” I can hear some of you asking. “I’m not special, I’m just an average person. I didn’t do anything important.” We’ve been taught that modesty is good manners. You shouldn’t toot your own horn. Who are we to think we’re important enough to warrant a memoir? No one wants to be an egotist. Or some of us feel that we’re just cogs in a vast machine, with little personal power or meaning. We think only those with wealth, power or influence, can make a difference in the world.

If these are your beliefs, you are wrong. Preserving your stories is not about ego. The meaning of your life does not depend upon fame or wealth or even “great” deeds.

We make wills to ensure our possessions are passed on to those who cherish them or can use them. But possessions are just things. Stories are *alive*. One of the

greatest gifts you can give your descendants is the story of who you are. What were your hopes, your dreams, your fears, your griefs? What did you learn? What did you teach? Who did you love?

At this time in history, when we as a world are grappling with global difficulties unprecedented in scope, such as terrorism, disease, ecological disasters and more, it is more important than ever that we share our stories with each other. It is vital that we know our individual stories matter. If we all knew that what we do, say, think or feel – no matter how trivial — has meaning and consequences, how would we behave differently? Would we be less inclined to apathy, despair and fear? Would we be more impelled to action, and to using our power to make this world a better place? I think so.

Stories of connection show how we fit into the great tapestry of life on earth. Today many of us feel isolated and alone. Families tend to be scattered around the globe, and many of our institutions are breaking apart. We have lost touch with our past and are afraid of the future. But when we share our experiences, we are reminded that we are still connected with each other. Each of us has a place and a part and a lineage.

Teaching stories allow us to pass along our accumulated wisdom. With technology advancing at a rate never seen before, and becoming increasingly specialized, we can start to feel that we don't understand how the world works anymore. But when we tell our stories, we are reminded that we are the keepers of wisdom – not machines or chemicals. That lessons on how to dream, how to love, how to laugh, can only be taught by example, and we are the only ones who can teach each other.

In this time of epic terrorism and disaster, with news media around the world blaring stories of violence and greed, heroic stories give us hope. They remind us that people can not only cope with disaster, but turn it into triumph. That ordinary people, folks just like us, have depths of courage, compassion and creativity. When we hear their stories, we are inspired to believe in the possibility of our own heroism.

Today fear, with its consequence of anger, permeates our society. Stories of hatred, revenge, and pathological madness abound. We have come to expect lies and secrets from our leaders. Our society is urgently in need of healing. In order to do so we need to forgive each other, and ourselves. Sharing our stories comforts us and reminds us that we can be whole. We walk along a path whose way stations are understanding, compassion, and finally forgiveness. We can be healed of our anger and our fear.

Connection, wisdom, inspiration and healing: these are the reasons we tell our stories. Telling our stories is important because we are.

## Chapter Two Connection

As this book's title says, you make history. History is not just about the famous or the infamous. It is not just about "great" things that make the newspapers. History is merely connection over time. We are all connected to each other, to the past, and to the future. We are connected by our stories.

We are all actors in the powerful drama of earth, part of the vast dynamic web circling the universe. Our actions reverberate along this web, creating consequences for all other living creatures. We do not merely react to events and historical trends — we create them. Each individual, even you, is a part of history.

And you are a witness to history. Do not underestimate the necessity of this role. You know what you saw and what you experienced. Tyrants and unscrupulous power-seekers always seek to rewrite the inconvenient (to them) past. This is why it is often said that history is "written by the winners." But those who preserve their stories and their truths make it harder for this to happen.

How many of us wish they had an ancestor's story, told in their own words? Sometimes all we know is a tantalizing tidbit: a tiny piece of an ancestor's story that raises as many questions as it answers. Wouldn't it be wonderful, we think, to know the hopes, dreams, wishes and fears of Great-Great-Grandma as she bounced over the plains in a covered wagon? Wouldn't it be cool to know what Great-Great Uncle Joe was thinking while he robbed that bank?

You'll never know now.

Yes, it would be wonderful to know our ancestors' stories. But what we often forget is that we, too, are someone's ancestor. We are the future historians' primary sources. A primary source is a term historians use to describe the thoughts, opinions and witness of those people who were *really there*. A primary source is the horse's mouth, so to speak. When you record what you saw, what you felt, what you did, you become a primary source. Two hundred years from now, historians or genealogists could be looking for you. What do you want them to find? Just your tombstone with the dates of your birth and death, and perhaps a line of verse?

Does that tell who you were: your dreams, desires, triumphs, griefs, loves and hates?  
Does it tell what steps you contributed to this dance of life we're all doing?

*A “You Make History” class participant wrote about connection in the vignette she read in class. In September 2001, “Heather’s”\* daughter had just begun her teaching career. She had been a junior high teacher for less than a week when September 11<sup>th</sup> happened. On September 12<sup>th</sup>, she gave her students an in-class assignment. “Write down how you feel about yesterday’s events,” she told them. “How did you hear about it? What did your parents say? Do you think America will change? What do you think we should do? Why do you think this happened?” The students wrote for ten minutes, then started to hand in their papers. Heather’s daughter wouldn’t take them. “I don’t want them,” she told her students. “They are for you to keep. In fifty years, your grandchildren will want to know where you were on September 11, 2001. And now you will be able to tell them. You have just created a primary source.”*

Telling your stories is affirmation of belonging. You have a rightful place in this world. Without you, the story of the world is incomplete.

\*Not her real name. All names and many story details in this book have been changed to protect identity.

## Sharing My Stories: *A Story of Connection*

I was told that my great-grandmother on my father's side was either a full-blooded Blackfoot Indian, or a half-breed Nez Perce Indian. The story depended on who you were talking to. Some relatives say she wasn't even Indian at all, but born in Kansas. It's hard to know the truth now, since she's been dead for fifty years, and so is nearly everyone who really knew her.

Everyone does agree that her name was Isabelle Evelyn McKay and she died at the age of 90-something in 1954. Before that, there seems to be some disagreement. The story I like best is the one told me by her daughter, my great-aunt, now long deceased. It goes like this:

Evelyn McKay was born and raised on a reservation in Idaho, and lived there until she was sixteen or so, about the mid to late 1880s. That's when the preacher James Pearson appeared on the reservation. He was a circuit preacher, meaning that his congregation included all the little towns from Eastern Washington through Idaho to Montana. He rode from town to town preaching his particular brand of Christianity for a few days, and then rode on. Towns would see him once or twice a year when he would regale them with hair-raising sermons on the hellfire and damnation he saw waiting for them.

Those in the family who remember Preacher Pearson generally agree that he was not a lovable man, being particularly given to frightening small children with vivid descriptions of hell. But there must have been something about him, for he was able to convince the young Evelyn to marry him. He took her away with him and plunked her down somewhere in Eastern Washington, perhaps Spokane or near it, and left her there to birth and raise their seven children while he rode his rounds, totally uncaring of the vicious racial bias against Indians and half-breeds which was normal for the western towns of the time.

She must have had a lonely, difficult life. But how do I know? Perhaps she coped well with a Bible thumping wanderer. Maybe she wasn't the victim of anti-Indian prejudice. But I wish I knew for sure. I bet she had some fascinating stories, at the very least.

I remember Evelyn McKay Pearson, although she died when I was five. I have a vague memory of me at three or four, climbing in her lap. She was the oldest person I had ever seen. I remember her fusty old lady smell, like rotting flowers, and the strip of skin hanging down over her dress that wiggled as she talked. (She had a goiter.) I remember her gnarled old hands softly patting my arm, tap tap tap. I felt no fear or disgust; not even boredom. Instead I remember liking her, and wanting to visit her again. We never did, but she must have felt the same connection. When she died she left me, out of all her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren – well over a hundred people – three of her special treasures. She left me her etched drinking glass, her pink handkerchief, and her shell necklace.

I wish so much that I could have known her.

## Chapter Three

### Wisdom

The human species is fortunate to have Elders. In many species, when a female can't reproduce and a male can't hunt or protect, their function ceases and they die. But we have grannies and grandpas who live well beyond the hunting and reproducing stage. These grandparents' function, their natural role, is to pass along their accumulated wisdom to the next generation. The younger generation wants and needs to listen. The elders need to speak.

If you've lived any time at all, you have learned some things. Not only the knowledge you have accumulated, but your wisdom, which is *applied* knowledge. Not only the what, but the where and when and how and why.

We are all teachers for each other. This is one of our primary roles. Excellent teachers have always used stories in their work. Jesus Christ, one of the greatest teachers who ever lived, was also one of the best storytellers. He used his parables, or story vignettes, to anchor his wisdom into his listeners' minds.

Mothers have known this truth for millennia. Some of the most popular and enduring teaching stories are the stories of pregnancy, birth and childrearing. Every mother has accumulated wisdom and knowledge that she instinctively shares with women who are doing it for the first time. New mothers automatically seek out experienced mothers, to hear, digest and apply their lessons. Even in our technological age, telling and listening to stories is still the primary method of passing along maternal wisdom about birth and babies.

*“When my wife found a Playboy magazine under our fourteen-year-old son's bed, she told me I had to talk to him about the facts of life,” read “Herb” from his in-class writing piece. “I didn't want to, because I didn't know what to say, but she was so upset I promised. So I took him fishing, where I figured we'd have time alone to talk. We drove a couple of hours up to my favorite river, and while we drove I tried to think about how to*

*bring up the subject of sex, but then we got to talking about baseball and so I didn't get around to it. Then at the river we concentrated on fishing, and the only stories I told him were about the ones that got away. Then when we drove home he fell asleep in the car.*

*I never did tell my son the facts of life, but he must have learned them somewhere because he grew up just fine, in spite of my wife's worries."*

When you tell your stories, you are teaching what you yourself have been taught, as well as your own original discoveries. You are passing along your wisdom. What are the lessons you have learned? Who taught you? Who have you taught? Who can you help?

## Sharing My Stories: A Wisdom Story

When I was fifteen I received my Driver's Learner's Permit, which filled me with anxiety and pride. Although I went to Drivers Ed, my father supplemented my learning by sometimes letting me drive his big blue station wagon. One Saturday he had some work to finish at his office, and took me with him to help with the filing. On the way home, he let me drive the car all the way from downtown Seattle to our suburban home in Bothell, about fifteen miles away.

He looked strange sitting in the passenger seat, as if his legs were too long or his head too high. He held his arms tightly to his side and his stomach pulled into his rib cage, as if he were bound by invisible ropes. I, on the other hand, felt small, way too small to fill the driver's seat in his car. I felt like a fake sitting there, with my hands sweating on the steering wheel and my feet nervously shifting from clutch to brake and back again.

"Don't use both feet," he instructed in a flat voice, a logical calm voice, the voice he used when there was a searing judgment behind the wrinkles on his forehead. So I tucked my left foot underneath the seat as best I could, where it soon developed a cramp. The foot cramp matched those in my hands, and my forehead felt as wrinkled as his. I pulled out of the parallel parking space without hitting anything. I drove down Fifth Avenue to Denny. I drove to Aurora and then to Lake City Way, which I followed all the way home. No incidents. Very little talking. Just sweat, cramps and wrinkles.

At last, our street, Pontius Road just out of Kenmore. I had almost made it. I saw our driveway coming up. There were two brick pillars on either side of the driveway, and it was a right turn so it should have been easy. When I saw the pillars I relaxed because now I knew I was almost home. The relief lasted until I drove straight into a pillar and knocked it down. It became a bunch of dark red rubble.

Silence. I was so stunned I could not say anything, much less do anything. My father just sat there.

Finally my father said, "Well, drive in." His voice was absolutely unchanged. Logical, calm and wise. I knew I was a miserable failure, a *grr!*, one of the worst terms in his world.

Looking back, I cannot pin down what my father did wrong. It is true that his emotionless demeanor unnerved me, but I know that if he did show his emotions it would possibly have been worse. After all, what emotion is proper when witnessing the destruction of your property?

I think now that some things should not be taught by parents. Driving is one of them. Because of this episode, I never even tried to teach my own children how to drive.

## Chapter Four Inspiration

All of us are desperate for leadership. We read the stories of brave, dedicated, independent, selfless, passionate, daring, compassionate, creative people, and we ourselves are moved to be daring, brave, selfless, creative, passionate. We read the stories of heroes because they give us hope. They prove it is possible. Heroes destroy apathy, despair and cynicism.

What we often fail to realize is that all of us have done brave deeds, followed our passions, achieved our goals – at least sometimes, and most of us more often than we think. We pooh-pooh some of our most meaningful acts, as if they didn't matter. They do matter. All of us have moments of heroism. Each of us is a hero to someone.

Most of do not think of ourselves as heroes. But we do not give ourselves enough credit.

When were you at your best? When did you pursue your passion with all that was within you? What was your proudest moment? When did you slog through, day after day, with no hope of reward, only because you knew it was right? When did you have a great burst of creative fire and the guts to carry it through? When did you stand up for yourself, or someone else? When did you speak the truth even though it wasn't easy? When did your kind words comfort another? Find the hero within yourself, and give her voice.

*One class participant, "Lisa," was convinced she had no impact on her times, especially the sixties and seventies. She remarked, "I didn't do anything that affected the world – I hardly remember the seventies! I was busy raising my kids and going to the PTA and sports events and making dinner and cleaning the house. My life was pretty narrow."*

*Oh yeah? During the class on "Science and Technology" we talked about the burgeoning environmental movement of the 1970s. Lisa read her*

*piece on celebrating the first Earth Day in 1970. She was the Leader of ten fifth-grade Girl Scouts, including her own daughter. That year she took her troop to the foothills of the Cascade Mountains to plant trees in honor of Earth Day. Each girl had a tiny fir tree that they carefully planted, digging holes just the right depth and patting in nutritious soil. As they worked, Lisa talked to them about the life-cycle of trees and their benefit to our environment. The girls loved the outing so much that the next year they went back to visit the trees to see how they were doing. Again, they had fun, so they went back the next year. And the next.*

*Of the ten girls in the troop, four of them are still visiting “their” trees on almost every Earth Day, over thirty years later. Now women in their forties, they have brought their children with them to plant more trees and watch out for the health of “their” forest. Lisa’s own daughter and grandchildren are among them.*

Did Lisa have an impact? Did she make a difference? Of course she did, and the difference she made is still continuing. Heroism need not be accompanied by blaring bugles and red flags blowing in the wind. Some of the most effective heroism is the quiet kind. It will endure just as long as the kind that wins medals.

Share your stories of bravery, devotion, selflessness, kindness, love, creativity, strength – and you can literally change the course of another person’s life. Yes, stories are that powerful.

## Sharing My Stories: *Never Underestimate the Power of Your Heroes*

Ever since I can remember I wanted to be a writer. I wrote plays, poems, stories, and even a newsletter for my family, which I subjected them to every Sunday night at the dinner table during the year that I was nine.

My mother kept some of my early efforts, and it is to her credit that she was able to see anything impressive in them at all. One of the first stories I wrote was a thrilling epistle called “The Cow.” It featured a cow who broke out of its pasture and ran amok through a quiet suburban neighborhood, mooing and bellowing in rage while it knocked over cars and trash cans. It even ate pet cats, birds and small dogs. The cow was eventually caught and ground up into hamburger, the moral being that bad behavior is punished.

I wanted to be a writer because I loved books and stories; it seemed a miracle to me that color, excitement and action could bloom out of black lines on white paper. My mother read to me until I was old enough to read on my own. I still remember the Christmas when I was nine or ten and given *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. I fell in love with its heroine, Jo March. She too wanted to be a writer, and her “scribbling” meant more to her than anything else. She wasn’t one of those namby-pamby, retiring, “good” girls – no, she was exciting, bold, tumultuous, a passionate rebel who had problems with anger and who rebelled against female restrictions. I identified with her strongly.

Jo March was my first author mentor. I read and re-read *Little Women* until the pages came out of the spine and I could recite whole chapters by heart. Jo March was my touchstone. She was how a writer *was*.

I was savagely disappointed when I first read *Little Men*, the sequel to *Little Women*. It told the story of an adult Jo, who had settled down to become a wife and mother, leaving her writing dreams behind. All the focus in the book went to her boys, and Jo was relegated to the sidelines, supporting and comforting. What was even worse was that she seemed happy with her diminished role. How could she? I thought.

I was somewhat relieved when I read the third book about the March family, *Jo’s Boys*. Here I learned that Jo had retrieved her writing dreams and become a successful writer in middle age. Better late than never, I thought, although to my eleven year old mind, it seemed like a long time to wait.

As I write this, I am struck with how my life has paralleled that of Jo March. I too, showed early promise and wrote from heart-stopping passions so deep I knew I would always keep writing. But I grew up and married, had children, and left my writing dreams to molder while I made a living and focused on my kids. Just like she did.

But today! Today I too am middle-aged, but my writing dreams are still young and vibrant. I published two books, both in my late forties. I am working on my third. I help others write their books. I make my living scribbling.

Just like Jo.

## Chapter Five

### Healing

All of us have been wounded by our life experiences. Even the luckiest among us go through pain; it's part of the human package. Some of our wounds are now wrinkled scars or hard lumpy places, and others are still festering sores. Stories are one way we can heal these emotional wounds. When you tell or write your stories, you examine not only what you did, but why you did it, and how, and to whom. You examine the same for other people. You describe circumstances and situations. Through this process you come to understand yourself better, understand others better, and perhaps understand a bigger picture. From understanding comes, inevitably, forgiveness. And forgiveness is a prime component of healing. In fact, there is no true healing without it.

Through revisiting your stories, you learn to forgive the bad stuff. You forgive others, and most importantly, yourself. What's more, other people reading or listening to your story go through the same process. They forgive you, or situations, or themselves. Telling your stories heals the world.

*I received a vivid demonstration of this healing power during one of my classes. That week the topic was "Wars and the International Scene," and since the class was made up of seniors, most over 70, World War Two figured prominently in their stories. We made our way around the room, people reading their vignettes. We came to a woman who had a thick German accent. She read an account of her experiences as a member of Hitler Youth in the 1930s, when she was between 9 and 13. She told how the children of her neighborhood believed totally in Hitler, how they bought everything he said, how it never even occurred to them that Germany might lose the war. She did not excuse her conduct or minimize its meaning; she just tried to explain how it felt to be a child in Hitler's Germany. She described her pride in her Hitler Youth uniform, and how much she enjoyed*

*the Youth meetings. All the children did. They sang songs, learned marches, ate cookies, hung out with their friends. All the grownups told them how important they were. What child wouldn't enjoy this?*

*She told how betrayed she felt when everything she had been told was exposed as a lie. How sorrowful she felt when her country was defeated. How confused she was when everything she had been taught was good was suddenly deemed bad.*

*The room was quiet as she read. I was dumbstruck at the incredible bravery I was witnessing. It takes a strong and courageous person to admit to a story like this, in front of your neighbors and friends. It takes a great devotion to truth.*

*There wasn't much feedback to her story. I don't think people knew what to say. I complimented her on her courage, and we moved on.*

*In the way things often happen, another person in the room spent part of her childhood in Hitler's Germany. And yes, I'm sure you have guessed: she was Jewish. She read her vignette. She read about hearing the boots of the Gestapo coming down the hallway of her apartment building, the night they dragged away her father and eldest brother. She wrote about how she and her mother and sisters barely escaped to South America with their lives.*

*There was deep silence after she read. Then a sob from across the room, from the ex-Hitler Youth. "I am so sorry," she cried. "I was so young. I didn't know. But I am so sorry!" Her eyes were full of tears. She wasn't the only one: much of the class was close to weeping. I know I was.*

The ex-Hitler Youth woman gave the Holocaust survivor a great gift that day. The victims of great evil find it hard to heal, because to heal completely they must be able to forgive the unforgivable. Most cannot. But here in this class, this Holocaust victim was given someone she could forgive. She could forgive a nine-year-old girl.

As an epilogue to this story, a few weeks later I drove into the parking lot on my way to class. Near the door to the school I saw the ex-Hitler Youth and the Holocaust survivor chatting and laughing together. I think they may have been trading recipes.

## Sharing My Stories: *Healing Dawn to Dusk*

I remember an old 12 string guitar, its polish scratched by the long fingernails of my lover, a marijuana soaked musician dressed in tattered jeans and a tie-dyed shirt. His hair fell over his eyes and down his back in cascades of disgust for the establishment, while he played the guitar with single minded concentration. His eyes were dark and intense despite the numbing effects of the joint hanging out of his mouth.

I remember what it was to be young and tempestuous, passionate about the truth and furious about the lies we were told by those we had trusted not to betray us. My favorite songs were heavy with E-flat and A-flat, minor chords which echoed the sadness and betrayal of those times, the great late 1960s.

Lovers betray you too. I wish he hadn't. I wish his hair had stayed black and lustrous forever, but I know, even though he is long gone from my life, that now it is gray. I know his face is now lined with his own failures and his own lies.

I wish we could wipe the surface of the guitar clean of scratches and rings where beer cans once stood, and someone would again play songs that no one had ever heard before. I wish we could once more strum the anthems of hope and despair. I wish we did not live to see both the dawn and dusk of the Age of Aquarius.

## Chapter Six

# The Secretary's Story

Here is a story that illustrates all four reasons to tell your stories: connection, wisdom, inspiration and healing. It goes like this:

“Sue” was born in 1920. Nearing her eightieth birthday, her children urged her to write some of her memories down. “Oh, there’s nothing special about me,” Sue said. “I was just an ordinary wife and mother at home, and a secretary in an office.” But her children kept asking, and finally this story emerged.

After high school, Sue took a secretarial course, although she planned to work only until she got married. She worked as a secretary through World War II, and in 1945 she married her Navy sweetheart. In common with millions of others, they started a family right away. Her husband worked in construction, and Sue stayed home taking care of the children.

In 1949, her husband was killed in an accident, leaving her with two small children, no life insurance, no savings, no job, and no family who could help. She was in deep trouble. But she was a trained secretary, so she soon found an office job, and back to work she went.

Sue worked hard and was valued by her employer as a top-notch secretary. But no matter how hard she worked, how long she worked, or how many management-trainees she trained, she was “just a secretary” and she worked those long hard hours for peanuts and no advancements. That’s the way it was for women in the business world of the 1950s.

The lack of recognition or respect for her work irritated Sue, but what really infuriated her were the poor pay and the impossibility of earning more. She did not earn enough to support her children, and they lived on the edge of poverty. Over time, Sue became angrier and angrier at the injustice and imbalance of her pay scale.

Sue took her anger and translated it into action. She joined a chapter of the National Secretary’s Association (now the IAAP), an organization formed to professionalize the occupation of secretary. Over the next *thirty-five* years, Sue worked

tirelessly for this organization. She attended evening meetings. She lobbied local, state and national politicians. She chaired membership drives. She held elected NSA positions. She worked on the Certified Professional Secretaries Examination, which promoted and standardized excellence in her profession. Sue campaigned ceaselessly for the recognition of the worth of secretaries, and a demand for better pay. It became her passion and her driving force in life.

Through it all, she continued working as a secretary. She raised her children, remarried and had two more children. She did not retire from either her job or the NSA until the mid-1980s.

Sue was not a radical or a feminist, and still isn't. She did not consider herself part of the "Women's Movement." She is not famous.

Sue's children knew their mother was a member of the NSA. In fact they had often complained that she wasn't there for them when they needed her. But they were dumbfounded when she told her story and they learned of the extent of her participation. Much of their hurt over their mother's perceived "neglect" dissipated, and was forgiven. Sue's grandchildren were delighted with her story. "Grandma was a feminist!" they crowed. "Grandma and Gloria Steinem were on the same team!"

Sue's family had always loved her, of course. But they had never known that her work helped to change the course of history. They had never seen her as a hero. But she was.

History, inspiration, wisdom, healing and forgiveness. They are all here in Sue's story. In one way, Sue is correct – there is nothing special about her. We all have stories that need to be told. Please share yours.