



THE WRITER'S BLOCK

The Story Within

By Writer and Storyteller Bernadette Cummings

A long-time friend and former roommate, I featured Bernadette in the S.E.M.O.M. Newsletter several years ago. I have brought back her story in this issue of PIF.

Growing up if someone called you a storyteller, you would defend your honor by arguing you were not. It was not the thing to be.

However, living in Los Angeles' full of creativity and performance artists of all types, I could not be happier to be labeled a non-fiction storyteller.

Five years ago, a former co-worker invited me to attend a Wednesday night show in Studio City, California called The Story Salon (www.storysalon.com), so I went.

The show was an hour and a half of first person narratives of original, non-fiction material written by writers, actors, comedians, producers, and regular folks like me.

The rules are simple: each person must tell a new story each time, stay within the time limit and no subject is off limits. The Salon's founder and producer, Beverly Mickins encouraged the performers to let their creative freak flags fly. And fly high they did.

The show was jammed packed with tale after engrossing tale, each five to seven minutes in length on varying topics. The subjects went from standing in line at the bank trying not to explode at a by-the-book teller, to an over-lactating new mom who was learning how to breastfeed and not drown her baby with milk or spray her living room curtains.

Also relayed were experiences about dysfunctional families, death of a partner, miscarriages, the love of superheroes, the wild antics of a former drug addict, and

my personal favorite topic – relationships, the good, the bad and the ugly.

The storytellers come from every walk of life, culture, race, and lifestyle. They speak of ordinary events. What makes it most interesting is each person's perspective even on theme nights when everyone writes about the same topic.

After attending my first show I turned to my friend and said, "You know I think I could do this." Her response was, "Of course you can, everyone has a story to tell. You just have to find your voice." I have been entertaining my friends with personal stories for years but thought perhaps my friends were just acting like they were entertained, out of kindness.

Could I really do this? Sure I had stories to tell, but what on earth did it mean to "find" my voice?

I attended The Story Salon each Wednesday making note of each performer's style and topic. I had read if you want to write well, write about what you

know. All I know is what I feel and I feel things deeply. I experience life the way Fred Savage's character from the TV show *The Wonder Years* did. There is a constant commentary going on inside my head in response to what's happening to and around me. The things we all think but never say. I have learned to say them now, if only on paper.

My writing encompasses my warped sense of humor and dry New York wit, peppered with cynicism, sarcasm and my love of sappy movies and cheesy songs. Armed with this knowledge of self, it took about five weeks before I felt comfortable enough to book and perform my first story (newbies are limited to three to five minutes).

I don't remember what I talked about that night, but it was well received. Every story at the Story Salon is well received. Newbies are welcomed with opened and congratulatory arms. It's not a place for critiques or judgment; it's a place for free expression.

After five or so years of telling stories, I feel my writing has developed in depth and maturity. I started out with stories about searching for the perfect Brazilian bikini waxer, my love of office supplies and Puerto Rican men because they treated me like a princess at a time, when I was clearly a ugly duckling.

Now I tackle topics about my need for human connection, the struggle of being lonely at times but not eager to give up my happy single life, relationships that did not feed my mind and soul, my functional alcoholic dad who has long passed away, forgiveness, acceptance, love and my refusal to live in denial. This all translates into being free and that is priceless.

Not every story goes over well. I've had situations where I looked into the audience and noticed I was losing them. So I cut it short and get off the stage. Disappointing but one bad night will not break me.

Finally, I have found my voice! Mine speaks to the heart of matters. Matters people are too

afraid or ashamed to admit they think or feel. My voice speaks to what I feel and if for some strange reason I don't know what I feel, you'll hear about that too.

I sprinkle my stories with humor even when they are of a serious nature, like when I laughed out loud during my dad's funeral because my crazy (literally) niece threw herself across my dad's chest while he laid in the casket. I had a vision of the funeral director closing up the casket with my niece inside.

It would have killed two birds with one stone. At times that humor is self-deprecating which makes me think I have one of the elements it takes to be a comedian...but that's whole other story.

Being a member of The Story Salon has changed my life. In addition to performing regularly at the Coffee Fix, I have performed at the No Ho Arts Festival, Jennifer's Coffee Connection, and Café Europe.

One of my short stories, He Saw Me, is published in the book The Story Salon Big Book of Stories: The Best from the Writer/ Performers of L.A.'s Longest Running Storytelling Venue, published in July 2006 (available on www.Amazon.com.)

Bernadette F. Cummings originally from Brooklyn, NY is a writer and storyteller living in the Los Angeles area.

