

What We Must Dare

by Kate Hulbert

I sit in our meeting place and wait for the writers to arrive. I facilitate a writer's group, *Writing My Life*, which has been gathering on Wednesday evenings from six to nine PM for twelve years.

We are a disparate bunch and a few of us have been coming since the beginning session in 1995. We put out our first book in 1997 and are about to publish our fourth collection of memoirs in November. We know each other well.

I spread out my class materials, on our big square table, and watch as each person comes in. Our ages range from 40 to 80. Our backgrounds are diverse, as are our professions. We tell the truth about ourselves, which, of course, is the best writing there is, and we hold each other in great respect.

Joe and Robert come in first. They are in their 70s, handsome, fit and animated in conversation. Clem, whose open, happy face makes me smile, comes in next. Lyn, my partner in life and work, brings up more chairs and Eileen arrives looking pretty and fresh, even after a long day at work. Debbie, Judy and Mary are next, all soft of voice and body, sharp of mind and wit. Laurie and Shirley come in laughing about something, Laurie bends down so that her dark hair falls into Shirley's silver. Jeanne and Mike look for adjoining chairs. This is new love abloom and makes us all happy. We are, I think as I look around the table, so beautiful.

Jane comes in late as we are passing around photographs of our last party. In one unflattering photo, Lyn and Jane look comically awful. She is more quiet than usual, and then we all begin to write.

Jane's piece is focused on her reaction to that hideous photograph. She is not amused. "I look so old," she says, "and with my hair pulled back, so severe." I look at the picture again,

then at one of myself. In this photo I am a laughing, 68-year-old, white-haired, well-padded woman. I look exactly like what I am. In this United States, and increasingly, in developed countries all over the world, this is not OK. In fact, not one of the people in this room is OK. We would all be exiled from the cult of eternal youth and extreme svelte that jeers at us from every medium. As we're getting ready to leave, I compliment Mary on her new glasses. "Oh, they make me look like an old lady" she says. She has automatically turned praise into insult, and by inference, offended us all. Why is looking like an old woman a bad thing? Why does old equal ugly?

On my way home I stop at the market and at checkout I'm assaulted by this headline: BOTOX AT 23. Ashlee Simpson, it seems, has also had multiple surgeries. The photos tell it all. 'Ashlee Before' is a nice-looking young woman with brown hair and a slightly prominent nose. 'Ashlee After' is a pert-nosed, plump-lipped blonde who looks like an anonymous plastic doll. I buy the magazine, deciding to write about what seems to be an escalating, contagious psycho neurosis. There are twenty more magazines in the racks, each one featuring similar stories, faces and bodies.

At home I go on the Internet and find 8,900,000 hits on "Cosmetic Surgery."

"Rate My Body. Find out how you can look with plastic surgery by using our virtual enhancement. Then get your body rated . . ." Who would allow an anonymous Google site to judge the attractiveness of their body parts? Another site advertises, "Affordable breast implants, liposuction and tummy tucks." I stop reading when I come to "Sexual enhancement laser surgery" and "Cosmetic vaginal surgery."

Another site has thousands of "Makeovers gone wrong," and photo after hideous photo of surgical disasters. When I can no longer stand the pictures I look up quotes:

"I'd like to grow old with my face moving."

Kate Winslet

"I wish I had a twin, so I could know what I'd look like without plastic surgery." Joan Rivers

"The thing you notice here in England after

America is how refreshingly ordinary people look because they haven't had their chin wrapped around the back of their ears." Sir Ian McKellen

And this from a supermodel: "I've been on the cover of every magazine in the world. . . . I've had my boobs and my eyes done, my forehead lifted, and my stomach done. I'm addicted to cosmetic surgery! But plastic surgery hasn't stifled the voice of my father telling me I'd never amount to anything." Janice Dickinson

Study after study confirms that cosmetic surgery does not make us happier. What are we looking for? Nancy Pelosi looks more like a startled child than someone adult enough to speak for the House. Do we think we can cheat death if we disguise ourselves in personas of youth? How exhausting! While we expend our time, money and energy in a futile quest to deny our own maturity, we could be learning a language, reading a history of the world, planting a garden or painting a watercolor. We could be writing our memoirs.

Lyn comes in from working outside as I am writing this. His cheeks are red from sun and exercise, his thinning gray hair wisps over his forehead, his eyes are bright behind dusty glasses. He has been enthusiastically digging post holes for our new fence. He has a pot belly. He's 68. He is beautiful.

Dag Hammarskjold once counseled, "What you must dare: is to be yourself." It's an interesting concept that being true to ourselves is daring. Perhaps if we have the courage to look like ourselves we'll have the nerve to think for ourselves, which might lead to seeing clearly, which could lead to standing up for ourselves and for our wounded mother-planet Earth. Jelaluddin Rumi, the thirteenth century Persian poet may have said it best: "let the beauty we love, be what we do."

Shouts and Whispers 4 is available for purchase at the Main Street Gallery in Weaverville, California, or phone 530-623-6710.

Not Alone

by Deborah Okenquist Cox

We wade through
wildflowers,
purple waves,
white froth
stirred
by fierce
autumn winds,
bees bump
against us
in the turbulent
air,
and the scent
of fresh cut hay
washes by.

We are not alone.

Spirits move here,
walking woodlands,

stalking
bear and deer,
footsteps
falling silently
on paths
of fallen maple
leaves
that run
like soundless
streams
of burning
tears.

Crows call,
leading us on -
we will
show you
the way
over hills,
through empty
fields,
to villages
of ghosts

sitting by cold,
long-dead fires.

Ancient
warriors
tell glorious
stories
of counting
coup
and stealing
ponies
from neighboring
tribes.

We are not alone.

Memories
murmur
in the mouths
of old women,
while shamans
tell tales
of creation.

Feel
the drum beats
deep within
your bones,
hear the swush
of deer-hide
and bare
skin
as spirits
dance
in tall, swaying
grasses.

In growing
darkness,
unseen waters
sing,
and echoes
of wolf-song
cling to clouds
of moonlight.

We are not alone.



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