

risk, courage, and women

contemporary voices in prose and poetry

edited by

KAREN A. WALDRON

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IN MEMORY

Dr. Amy Freeman Lee
of San Antonio, Texas
1914–2004

A Renaissance Woman who asked *Why wait?*

Artist, educator, and humanitarian, through her witty, irreverent words she risked much while expressing deep love and respect for all living things. She fought against racism and discrimination, her voice pouring forth in thousands of lectures nationally, while creating countless publications and art exhibitions from hand and heart. Her civility, ethics, and universality extended from the Humane Society to the creation of the San Antonio Symphony. Her trademark of incisive humor with a serious bite invited friends to become her family, while telling her critics that she was unafraid.

She “pierced the sky
so the light could sparkle through.”

We miss her.

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acknowledgments

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With deep appreciation and admiration, we thank our authors, remarkable women who made choices to move ahead during circumstances that would have made the best of us falter. They shared both original and published work freely, dedicating all net proceeds from book sales to fund breast cancer treatment for uninsured women. They also offered significant suggestions and reflections as the direction of the book evolved. For many, our initial connections developed into email bonds as we came to know and sustain each other personally during difficult periods and also to share individual joys.

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strong women

Pat Mora

Some women hold me when I need to dream,
rock, rocked my first red anger through the night.
Strong women teach me courage to esteem,

to stand alone, like cactus, persevere
when cold frowns bite my bones and doubts incite.
Some women hold me when I need to dream.

They walk beside me on dark paths I fear,
guide with gold lanterns: stories they recite.
Strong women teach me courage to esteem.

They watch me stumble on new trails I clear.
In hope, feed me their faith, a warm delight.
Some women hold me when I need to dream.

In their safe arms, my visions reappear:
skyfire voices soar, blaze, night ignite.
Strong women teach me courage to esteem.

They sing brave women, sisters we revere
whose words seed bursts of light that us unite.
Some women hold me when I need to dream.
Strong women, teach me courage to esteem.

Reprinted from *Communion* (Arte Público Press, 1991).

women involved in nurturing, giving, and sharing (WINGS)

All net proceeds from this book will be donated to the WINGS foundation, to provide critical treatment services for women diagnosed with breast cancer. WINGS was formed to fill the vacuum that exists between detection and medical attention for uninsured women. It works to fund the treatment for those whose mammograms indicate anomalies. It provides diagnostic testing, surgery, chemotherapy expenses, as well as services not traditionally offered, but sorely needed, such as outpatient medication and psychological counseling.

WINGS creates a network of physicians, healthcare facilities, laboratories, and other professional services for breast cancer victims, including general and gynecological surgery, hematology/oncology, radiology, pathology, reconstructive surgery, and anesthesia. The more than 200 involved physicians and service providers agree to reduce their customary fees to ones that WINGS can afford to pay from donations. Uninsured women are referred to WINGS by physicians and radiologists. Once deemed eligible, they are provided all necessary treatment at no cost.

Aware that breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in women between the ages of 40 and 55, and approximately 180,000 new cases of breast cancer occur each year in the United States, Kathryn Safford, M.D. and Terri Jones co-founded WINGS in 1999. Breast cancer survivors themselves, they were moved to action after learning that thousands of women die each year due to lack of health insurance or enough funds to pay for breast cancer treatment. In 2000, they received a \$50,000 Use Your Life award from Oprah's Angel Network. She said that they "found a way to give help and hope and life to women facing a death sentence." Her awards go to "those who make a difference." They also received start-up funds from the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. Currently, their ongoing operations are funded totally by donations and grants.

Risk, Courage, and Women

introduction

Karen A. Waldron

When my dreams showed signs
of becoming
politically correct ...
then I began to wonder.

ADRIENNE RICH: "North American Time"

The genesis of this book came from years of observing women who grew beyond political correctness to take amazing risks as a matter of course or necessity, resulting in extraordinary outcomes. Through personal choice or life situations, they made courageous decisions to stand fast or to risk pushing ahead into the unknown. Some were quietly steadfast while others were directly confrontational. Age and experience did not appear to be their reasons for accepting and mastering life's challenges, but instead it was a determination to learn more about themselves through going beyond socially accepted boundaries. Many times, they risked the loss of freedom, love, and physical well-being by working toward a higher belief such as the good of others. As a result, they not only changed their own lives, but moved toward justice and equality for women, minorities, animals, the disabled or ill, and the impoverished.

We decided to create a literary work where brave women would simply tell their stories. Our goal was to explore *why* these women took risks and demonstrated extraordinary courage, with the outcome of inspiring other women to fulfill their own dreams. In the words of Edna St. Vincent Millay, we wanted to examine those inner qualities or needs that forced them to

Soar, eat ether, see what has never been seen;
depart, be lost,
But climb."

"On Thought in Harness"

We felt that if we came to understand writers' "real selves" (Benstock, 1988) through their own telling, we could gain insights that would encourage our readers to develop their own personal strengths.

In selecting our authors, we chose women from diverse backgrounds who were known to be outstanding writers. Importantly, they had a demonstrated history of risk-taking towards positive outcomes for themselves and others. As Bauhn (2003) suggests in her review of women and courage, each writer is one who is self-assertive and has freed herself from tradition and superstition in order to explore the world's possibilities while taking charge of her own destiny. Yet, we considered only those works where the author becomes "Everywoman," or as Viola reflected in Shakespeare's *The Twelfth Night*, "I am all the daughters of my father's house"

We selected authors and pieces that fulfilled the critical need of allowing readers to relate to each author even if individual life situations were different. As Heilbrun (1997) reflects,

Biographies of women will offer unmet friends provided the subject of the biography has encountered struggles or dilemmas or crises of choice that the reader can learn from, as one would from a friend's. We like, I think, to read as women about women who have braved the terrors and the hopes we share, at least to some degree. Courage in women always catches me up, moves me to compassion and the desire to offer them succor, sustenance if possible...The secret of unmet friends is that they have called upon the same strengths to escape or endure the same kinds of situations. (153)

The book evolved much as a child grows, with unexpected turns, poignant moments, and divergence from original expectations. Initially, we asked *When have you taken a risk that has changed your life?* and for those who wanted to tell stories of mothers, grandmothers, and brave women, *When has someone you know or admire taken a risk that has changed her life?* It all seemed direct and easy.

Yet, early on, Janice Brazil commented, "I tell my stories in poetry. That's how I write." So the book expanded its genre, and Janice's poems, along with those of Pat Mora, Rosemary Catacalos, and Bárbara Renaud González became part of its very core. We agreed with Long's observation (1999) that "Telling women's lives often involves new or mixed genres . . . The fullness of women's accounts reproaches the leanness of generic autobiography, and contradicts its claim of universality" (55). As we expanded the genre, poetry, essays, and stories flowed organically together. Our themes expanded as Bonnie Lyons shared poems of powerful Biblical women, while Gaynell Gavin, Joan Loveridge-

Sanbonmatsu, and Mitsuye Yamada explored not only specific risks, but the power of moral necessity to support the oppressed, lending to uncommon demonstrations of courage.

While we have compiled this book primarily for an audience of students in literature and Women's Studies classes, we also see its significance for community literary study groups exploring the nature of women's risk and courage. Although it deals with women's reflections and observations, thematically it is also a book for male readers who wish to understand better the inner self of each of us. As Adrienne Rich noted in her Commencement Address at Smith College (1979), while it is critical to gain the most skill and knowledge possible from our professions, "most of your education must be self-education." We believe that this education begins in childhood, and for the privileged, gains focus through the university. Truly "At the end of the day....," it culminates later in life as each of us reflects upon the way that we have used these insights towards personally courageous acts.

We learned much along the journey of this anthology: that while our authors were themselves from diverse backgrounds, they did not focus their identity on race, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation. Instead, they answered our thematic questions and wrote about uniquely shaping experiences. Yet, too often the world finds it hard to distinguish achievement from diversity, as Professor Demetrice Anntía Worley writes in "Dancing in the Dark":

I present papers in white academia.

I match their foreign movements.

My jerky fox trot is invisible to them.

They see a waltz of standard diction.

"She speaks so well for a black woman ..."

Many of our writers went beyond diversity issues by passionately embracing communities originally outside their own. Paula Cooley immerses us in her mother's dedication to teaching Appalachian children to dance, while Ruth Kessler introduces a non-Jewish woman who risked her life to shelter Jews during the Holocaust. Connie Curry's award-winning work on supporting African Americans during the Civil Rights movement explores the lives of Mississippians Mae Bertha Carter and Winson Judson as they engaged in "civil disobedience."

A goal of this book has been to encourage readers to expand beyond a sense of "us versus them" through embracing all communities. In "Stock," Hilda Raz speaks brilliantly to a mother's poignant acceptance of her transgender son:

Sarah was born to Hilda who was born to Deborah, who was born to her mother, Hilda. Sarah was like me, someone who says in the silence over the newly lit candles, make with us celebrations of joy or of mourning, rites of passages for one another, the kneading of bread, the salving of wounds, flesh healing between stitches, the slow unlearning of silence, the slow recession of nausea, weakness, the intolerable flesh cut off by the friendly surgeon engaged with the help of the other. We will never leave you, never turn our eyes from each other, never shake off the fingers entwined with our own, never refuse presence at births or deaths, you are my child. I am your mother. Who is of my flesh. Aaron.

Such acceptance of life outside the typical is not without pain, as Doris Sage reveals in her description of time spent in prison for her protests of the School of the Americas' role in El Salvador. Yet, as Adrienne Rich notes about Madame Curie, "Her wounds came from the same source as her power." In our selection of authors, it was paramount that they be very courageous women.

From the onset, one of our most difficult tasks was to consider *Courage* itself in a manner that takes it beyond a "battlefield quality" (Bauhn, 2003). We found that reasons that women take risks and demonstrate courage may be quite different from those of men (Meccouri, 1999). We agreed with Walton's (1986) reflections that typically society looks to wartime experiences, the Presidency, or major business risks for examples of courage. But, as she notes, women are under- or not-represented in these areas, negating opportunities to be considered courageous if these are our only criteria. She writes,

The view of courageous action as a sudden outburst of will manifested in aggressive actions should immediately be countered by the fact that some of the most courageous acts are deliberated through a period of solitary reflection and are quiet acts of high principle. Far from being aggressive, such an act or refusal to act may be a deliberate forfeit of one's own interest for the sake of others. (9)

Indeed, in her essay, "Belfast: A Woman's Story," journalist Estelle Shanley castigates herself for not remaining in Northern Ireland to train the women there to work with the press. Years later, she continues to regret allowing her family to pull her home from her work there because of their concern for her safety. But in this "Catch-22" situation, we observe the relative nature of courage. Which of us would have even considered going to the Belfast war zone in 1980? Yet, she measures her courage not by her risks taken, but by forsaking her own needs for that of her family. Such are the pulls that women face.

Carol Gilligan (2002) asserts that it is important to acknowledge that women are conditioned to nurture others before meeting their own needs. Bauhn (2003) adds: “The often ignored fact is that courage is by no means incompatible with the ‘softer’ virtues of compassion and empathy; on the contrary, courage may be fuelled by one’s perception of other people being in need of one’s support” (8). Indeed, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman (1995) underscores empathy as a critical variable in emotional well-being and in successful relationships.

In her exploration of “Feminisms and the Self” (1995), Griffiths elaborates that women’s most significant definition of self is found in relationships with others, either as individuals or groups, rather than in those situations that are unaffected by relationships. However, she adds that “While all children—and adults—need to accommodate themselves to the wishes of others some of the time, a requirement to do so all the time leads to what are described as feelings of being inauthentic, or a loss of a real self” (87).

Muske (2000) agrees, describing how women are diverted from knowing and loving themselves because their lives are consumed by attaching to men and raising children. She observes how this “division of spirit” both enlivens and frustrates the need for common speech among women, and how having a literary voice provides opportunities to shatter women’s frequent silence. Muske explores Adrienne Rich’s powerful resolve,

“And I start to speak again.”

She reflects how Rich’s voice models for each of us how our desires for an historical, as well as truth-telling or real self, can merge into a single dramatic voice.

Women might ask how far they have come from Emily Dickinson’s plaintive, almost chat-room-like cry,

I’m nobody / Who are you?

For still today, we see that a major aspect of a woman’s courage may be to stand alone and speak, despite fear and the possibility of loss. Clearly, through social actions and acquiring a literary voice, breaking out of silence can involve tremendous risk along with substantive fear. Bauhn (2003) observes that all of us have fears of injury and death, as well as that of failure and social ostracism. She adds that these primary fears may be restrictive enough that we become unwilling to take risks despite the greater social and personal importance of the outcomes.

Indeed, Aristotle’s ethical theory supports that the courageous person fears what should be feared, such as disgrace, both personally and for one’s

family. While he observes that feelings of fear are natural, he states that they must be managed in order to fulfill the outcome of courage: the creation of good for self and society (*Nicomachean Ethics*).

How does this theory impact women, both as activists and writers? Clearly, as nurturers, women find great personal meaning in their relationships with others. Therefore, ostracism and disgrace become profound inhibitors of their desire to act. The fear of loss of others' respect and regard may warrant tremendous risk to a woman. The greater the risk, the greater the fear and the amount of courage necessary to act.

The themes of this book developed as we realized from many authors' pieces an even greater fear: that life may be spent without making a difference. Their organization emerged in two stages: the arrangement of topics based on the source of the woman's strength to take risk, and the subsequent thematic sequencing. As authors submitted poetry, stories, and essays, we found that their work clustered around their discussion of the source of their courage. Some elected profound risks from a personal inner strength that sustained them. Risk nourished and gave substance to their lives. For others, it was a faith that things would be better in the future despite current adversity. Sometimes religious, sometimes intuitive, their belief carried them. A third group of authors wrote about deliberating painfully, at times for years, before choosing to take a risk. This process of choosing freely and carefully gave them the strength to move forward. From these inner workings of sustenance, faith, and choice, we developed the initial chapters of the book.

But there were a number of authors who found their source of courage by reaching further *outside* themselves. The tapestry of their attachments enabled them. Some relationships were positive and familial, while others emanated from the pain of love and attempts to comprehend human complexity. Additional authors relied on the true, or "real" self, taking forth the power they drew from themselves, Nature, and limitations of their physical being. Having determined their needs at the very core of their being, they refused to be silenced by societal obstacles. The final group of themes described authors who crossed boundaries imposed by tradition, discrimination, and fear of mortality. Through their actions, some experienced a personal impact, while others changed the lives of thousands. In Maya Angelou's terms, they demonstrated "The Power of One."

As we organized these themes into the book's subsequent chapters, we began with the most inward-looking theme, *Sustenance for Living*, and moved gradually and sequentially away from the self into relationships with others.

We completed the sequence with those themes moving outward by challenging traditional barriers to women.

Our thematic organization begins and ends with the words of Dr. Maya Angelou. In an interview shared as a preface for this book, she reflects,

Years ago, I deduced that it costs everything to win, and that it costs everything to lose. So, if I didn't take a risk, if I didn't take a dare, then I would lose everything I wish women could see themselves Free. Just see and imagine what they could do if they were free of the national and international history of diminishment See yourself as you want to be and then begin to work toward it. With a will and a way, and with laughter, with humor, with strength, with passion, with compassion, with style, and with love.

From "On the Pulse of Morning," delivered at the inauguration of President Clinton, her presence lifts us again in the final words of this book:

Here, on the pulse of this new day,
 You may have the grace to look up and out
 And into your sister's eyes,
 And into your bother's face,
 Your country,
 And say simply
 Very simply
 With hope—
 Good morning.

She elaborates the wish and goal of this work, that readers may be inspired by the presence of a new day and shared writings to take a risk and "see themselves Free."

Sustenance for Living

The organization of this book's selections begins and ends in world conflict and the peaceful resolution that comes between individuals much more easily than nations. At age 105, Naomi Shihab Nye's grandmother on the West Bank, looks out across her "difficult" land and reflects that "one moment on top of the earth is better than a thousand moments under the earth." As with other authors throughout this chapter, she explores how the inner self is sustained by the nurturing of basic needs. The sharing of food, human relationships, the essence of nature, and home gives substance to life.

We move into another house, far from the Palestinian world, where Janice Brazil's grandmother nourishes others with food while sustaining herself

with memories and pictures of her “Cadet” lost in World War I and her son in Viet Nam. Yet, as in Nye’s piece, she is supported in a world of love by a granddaughter. She too is able to say, “Life is good.”

Stories and songs also provide cultural sustenance. Indicating that the distance from the West Bank to Mississippi may not be so far after all, Demetrice Anntía Worley’s “little brown children” reflect on the stories of ancestors who stood their ground so others could live. Next, Wendy Barker relates Helen’s escape from Menelaus, prompted by women’s stories of drudgery that finally sent Helen to her lover, Paris. And in Waldron’s poem, we see the Magdalen Laundries as prisons for “promiscuous” women and mothers of children born out of wedlock. It is a Druid song that feeds this young mother’s resolve to protect her own life and that of her unborn child.

But Nature provides another critical thematic sustenance. Echoing throughout this chapter are Willa Cather’s words about returning to our “real home.” In *The Song of the Lark* (1915), protagonist Thea Kronborg’s observations of her respite in Arizona’s Panther Canyon set the stage for our authors Susan J. Tweit and Joan Loveridge-Sanbonmatsu. Cather writes,

Here everything was simple and definite, as things had been in childhood. Her mind was like a ragbag into which she had been frantically thrusting whatever she could grab. And here she must throw this lumber away. The things that were really hers separated themselves from the rest. Her ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer. She felt united and strong.

Our chapter ends with profound revelations of courage of the spirit, a theme marked throughout. Ruth Kessler depicts phenomenal strength during the Holocaust and afterwards, where silence is the only logical and emotional way to handle the unspeakable.

During the most difficult of times, others express their longing and humanity through the arts. Paula Coe’s mother nourished the human spirit by teaching dance to Appalachian children during the Depression. Maya Angelou continues to underscore the critical nature of nurturing the spirit in the self. In her remarkable “Art for the Sake of the Soul,” she writes,

The strength of the black American to withstand the slings and arrows and lynch mobs and malignant neglect can be traced directly to the arts of literature, music, dance and philosophy that, despite significant attempts to eradicate them, remain in our community today....When a larger society would have us believe that we have made no contribution of consequence to the Western world—other

than manual labor, of course—the healing, the sustaining and the supporting roles of art were alive and well in the black community.

Art as sustenance for the soul.

This first chapter underscores courage as coming from a unique intertwining of the arts, including stories and songs of ancestors, the land, and most importantly, our ability to sustain each other through powerful relationships. The literature within is organized to demonstrate this flow of sustenance for the inner self.

Faith in the Unknown

The theme of our next chapter, *Faith in the Unknown*, is supported by Werner and Smith's (1998) longitudinal research studying factors that support resilience in overcoming adversity and in reaching our potential. Sometimes this belief is religious, other times personally spiritual. A faith that the future will be as good as or better than the present can provide a powerful pillar for our willingness to take risks.

As a young woman with no one else willing to make choices for her, Valerie Bridgeman Davis is forced to trust her intuition as she looks inside her own soul. Meanwhile, the brilliant passion God sends Bárbara Renaud González in "La Diosa" stirs her faith in her own writing, taking her beyond the powerful fears of living her immeasurable desires. She writes,

*Want my stories to be the bread of thousands
each word a bomb, a machine gun piercing
those walls of stone we call the heart*

*Yes, satinsheet bullets, perfume-throated seducing
my enemies so even the preacher amens
my sermon*

*Want my words howling baptized
born again not afraid
of dying either, laughing at the ropes and
inquisitor's stake a testament to the story as I,
woman, know it, to hell with
the consequences, the damning
because I dared to say it*

Writers such as Muske (2000) earlier explored negative outcomes of women's diversion from their own needs into consuming relationships with men. In poet Wendy Barker's "Ithaca on the Landing," Penelope holds back

her desires for the young men guarding her, having faith in Ulysses' return. But her temptations make her very human, very real. A modern-day Joan Shalikashvili risks her future on an intuitive love that forces her into a similar faith that her own feelings will guide her future. That faith sustains her journey throughout unfamiliar territory.

This poignant humanity becomes part of Terri Jones' profound fear, handled only by equal faith, in her essay, "Hints of a Cancer Victor." She writes, "My God is not a vengeful God," and Jones is sustained by the professionals and friends who surround her, as well as an impenetrable faith. Not only did she elevate her own spirit, but with her physician, Dr. Kathy Safford, she went on to create the WINGS organization ("Women Involved in Nurturing, Giving, and Sharing") to fund treatment for breast cancer victims without health insurance.

It is with both irony and love that we include the poems of Dr. Amy Freeman Lee, who died shortly after submitting these amazing pieces. Approaching her ninetieth birthday, she wrote of her "lions," the faith that gives her

... courage for the jump
 Into the only place where the future lies.

She concludes her poem "Why Wait?" with the words

I fly!

Similarly, Gail Hosking Gilberg follows the pull of the "tiger" that envelopes her to immerse herself in her own voice and take it forward into unknown places. We wonder if their kindred spirits are regenerated into poet Barbara Lovenheim's subsequent painful move forward to her own future:

I stepped out of my fragile self
 And buried my sins in the yielding earth.

This chapter ends with another type of regeneration, a faith in others that extends beyond most of our capabilities. Diane Graves writes of the Salvadoran birth-mother who gave up her daughter for adoption, filled with a faith that the child's future would be better than knowing only war and hunger. Indeed, Graves expresses great hope that her adopted daughter, Elena, will show the promise of the future that was born from such tremendous sacrifice.

The Courage of Choice

Our third chapter, *The Courage of Choice*, depicts the decisions Walton (1986) believes are the essence of courage: "(1) careful presence of mind and deliberate action, (2) difficult, dangerous, and painful circumstances, and (3) a

morally worthy intention.” As such, our writers are aware that the outcomes can be negative and often severely punitive. Yet, they choose action over apathy, mirroring Kingsolver’s (2002) observation,

In the long run, I find it hardest to bear adversaries on the other end of the spectrum: those who couldn’t care less, who won’t or can’t fathom the honest depths of love and grief, who opt out of the bull-ride through life in favor of the sleeping berth. These are the ones who say it’s ridiculous to imagine that the world could be made better than it is. The more sophisticated approach, they suggest, is to accept that we are all on a jolly road trip down the maw of catastrophe, so shut up and drive.... In the long run, the choice of life over death is too good to resist. (250–51)

Many of the decisions of these authors were years in the making, very different from the common view of courage as a daring rush into action. The lives in this chapter are woven together by the time and deliberation of making huge choices.

As a national leader in the movement for humane treatment of animals, Amy Freeman Lee finally agreed to address the most difficult audience of her career, a prestigious but hostile group of animal laboratory scientists. She proceeded with the lecture because of her “personal belief as a nondenominational theist that all creatures are part of the divine creation and, therefore, are sacred.”

Catherine Kasper’s beliefs also allowed her to proceed after years of delay by parents’ overwhelming illnesses and disapproval of her desires to attend graduate school. As with Amy Freeman Lee, she too risked rejection by a traditional academic world that might be unwelcoming to her non-traditional goals.

Both she and Professor Demetrice AnntíaWorley turned to writing as a full engagement of themselves. In “The Dark and Gray of Morning Light,” Dr. Worley depicts the lonely process of moving beyond the painful ending of a relationship as she doubts herself and “questions her words.” Only with the choice to “lift the veil” of her aloneness can she find her own strength to dream and write.

Aloneness also permeates the lives of those in cultures outside mainstream society. Isaura Barrera’s courage is “born of *corazón*, not guts.” Finally accomplished as the result of painful personal reflections and experiences, hers is a story of risk and choice to synchronize these often dissonant worlds. Additional authors also use experience as the source of their courage to choose. Tragically scarred by physical abuse, the woman in Mitsuye Yamada’s

poem, “The Club,” “felt a slight tremor” through the wood in the statue used to hit her. Therein, she found the power to leave “forever.” This same life flow immerses Joan Loveridge-Sanbonmatsu in the summer song of the tiny tree frog, the *coqui*. Filled with a strength to overcome fear, she can now move forth into the darkness outside.

Doris Sage and Mitsuye Yamada explore the courage of being an activist, dispelling even concerns of imprisonment to support moral governmental justice. Sage goes to prison for her beliefs and once there gives voice to the inmates. In reflections on similarly incarcerated friends, Yamada’s voice explains to her traditional Japanese mother,

If we put people who want to do the right thing in prison
it keeps other good people who want to do the right thing
from doing it.

Sage exposes us to the plight of women forced by life’s situations to make alternative choices, such as going to prison rather than testifying against their men. But these incarcerated, often poverty-stricken women “helped each other; they taught us the unwritten rules ... The women were magnificent!” She brings to light the reality of so many of a forgotten underclass.

Similarly, Biblical scholar and poet Bonnie Lyons brings humanness to courage and removes the sense that choice is restricted to wealth or entitlement. Through exploring Rahab’s choice to betray her people to Joshua’s spies, she presents the irony of a prostitute exploring a moral dilemma:

I could not have saved the kingdom;
it was already doomed.
I saved what I could.
The same logic that allowed me
to survive as a harlot.

Gaynell Gavin also explores the bravery of the impoverished. Instead of writing of her own activism as an attorney in choosing to represent low-income families, she says, “It’s about Ruth.” Agonizing over the bureaucracy that prevents a sexually abused child, Laura, from being adopted by Ruth, her courageous aunt, Gavin reflects in personal frustration: “I also did not want to believe that black children received less care and attention from the Department than other children, but how could I know ... if the delay in Laura’s sex abuse consultation was due to overwork, honest skepticism about her ability to give information, racism, laziness, or other reasons that hadn’t occurred to me?” Despite near hopelessness, she and Ruth both choose to help this child.

This saga of powerful women agonizing over choice spans across time. Bonnie Lyons poetically explores Eve's decision to leave the protection and boredom of the Garden and enter into human time and death, but also "adventure, change, possibility," while a modern day Valerie Bridgeman Davis feels the lure backwards of her lover and also decides

if she does not go
this time,
she will never
leave

As with Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, each of the women in this chapter would hear a figurative door slam behind them as they choose life and risk over the familiar.

Seams of Our Lives

As Muske (2003) and Gilligan (2002) observe, a woman is not totally her own person, but is intricately bound to a community of others. In addition, she is part of a life cycle and universality based on relationships with nature, life, and death. Authors write of the expansiveness of this tapestry of realities in the chapter, *Seams of Our Lives*. The edges of the tapestry's seams are sometimes smooth, other times jagged, and occasionally ripped apart. Some are permanent while others are basted together as a temporary hem during times of celebration or tragedy. But often it is this connectivity that shapes women's ability to risk the journey.

Through her writing, Gail Hosking Gilberg connects with the world of kindred authors who "carry around" her words as treasures. She discovers that she is having a significant impact on the world outside. Only by another discovery, that of the bond between life and death, was Bert Kruger Smith able to manage her immeasurable grief at the death of her young son, Jared. In a personal conversation with this book's first editor, Dr. Smith related, "Writing Jared's story was my therapy. It pulled me back into the world around me." With terrible sadness, we report the subsequent death of Bert Kruger Smith, a brilliant writer and mental health activist. Yet, her reflections in this work remain as a testament to the continuity of her words that unite us even in her passing.

Nanette Yavel writes of Sarah, who was unable to sustain this fragile connection with reality, and poignantly explores the jagged edge of mental illness. Sarah relates far better with the inner selves of fellow institutionalized patients than does the arrogant, but powerful, medical community. Similarly, poet Ruth

Kessler explores how this very type of heart is viewed as untrustworthy, pushed aside in order to worship the “False Prophet” that envelopes our world. Both authors rely on the individual’s connectedness to intuition and inner knowledge as basic to the human condition.

Within wonderful imagery, Janice Brazil allows us to glimpse a snapshot of age observing youth, along with a memory tying the present to the past. Relationships and a lifetime of seams also stitch together Hilda Raz’s *Stock*. As in Brazil’s poem, memories support a life flow of connectedness with loved ones. For Raz, this involves a mother relating to a daughter who is now her son, and to her critically ill father-in-law. But her own desperate health crisis initiates a stream of consciousness that causes reflection on past and future, Christianity and Judaism, illness and death, friendship and forgiveness, women as nurturers. As Raz’s reality evolves in a dream-like quality, Wendy Barker’s Venetian traveller cannot sleep with her desire to pull away the tight masks that have kept her from the “lightness” of “her own sun and moon.”

The tie of relationships is also profound in a woman’s life. Four subsequent poems move from love’s connectedness and initial simplicity through its complex growth, and finally, its dissolution. Amy Freeman Lee explores the pain of loneliness as a loved one enters our life briefly to “eat, and talk / And laugh,” and then to depart. The ache of losing the precious “Now” moments to time and distance underscores the heart’s pain without the presence of those we love.

Barbara Lovenheim artfully weaves us down the dual paths of the innocent wedding ceremony, from the rehearsed aisle to the final moment when future paths will never again be so simple and predictable. In a setting far removed, for three days Rosemary Catacalos’ lovers “learned abandon / and rose out of ourselves / and became one overwhelming thing.” Circumstances separate these lives, and despite love and joy, they must part again.

The parting is final for the Plaintiff in Demetrice Anntía Worley’s “Judgment of Dissolution—Found Poem.” Life’s simplicity in Lee’s initial connectedness and in Lovenheim’s wedding ceremony is long gone, along with the passion of Catacalos’ lovers. Worley writes, “Efforts at reconciliation have failed.”

In our final stories of the chapter, connections span across oceans as Estelle Shanley and Naomi Shihab Nye remain tied in heart to family and international roots. Shanley is torn by professional and family pulls known to so many women. She cannot give up her Irish roots and desert the women of Belfast who need her journalism skills. Nor can she put her family through the daily turmoil of worry over her safety in a life-and-death situation. Nye’s grand-

mother is also tied to her land. She fights to maintain with dignity the normalcy of a routine that sustains her. While, as with Shanley, she cannot control a world gone mad, she can still “stitch the mouth / in the red shirt closed.”

The Real Self

While a woman’s relationships with others, the land, life, and death form an inescapable connectedness, for many it is the discovery of the “real self” that establishes her courage. In this next chapter, poetry and narratives are bound together by the presence of an inner strength that allows a woman to claim and control her life and interactions. In *Walden*, Thoreau reflects,

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward and through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance ... till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say ‘This is, and no mistake’ Be it life or death, we crave only reality.

Our chapter begins with the power of mothers to give strength to their sons to battle racial prejudice. In her award-winning poem “When I Am Asked,” Valerie Bridgeman Davis’ role in the social revolution is to raise strong black sons by “instructing the saplings / Of the next revolution in the school of my experiences.” Both she and Joan Loveridge-Sanbonmatsu must “reclaim the stolen esteem /And broken spirit” of offspring who have committed no offense other than being born within a racial minority. In “Two Warriors,” Loveridge-Sanbonmatsu writes,

Raising two warriors
to stand undiminished
hearts full
with *gambaru*
to meet this world
giving them a shield
to deflect racism,
a shield with tensile strength,
This has not been easy.

Gambaru, Japanese for *courage and energy*, brings us back to Isaura Barrera’s courage born of *corazón*, or heart, rather than of the “guts” viewpoint of a majority society.

Kim Barnes models another message for her children: that danger can be overcome with bold actions. As Walton (1986) notes, “Both fear and calmness are contagious.” While Barnes has a life-long give-and-take relationship with

the river, she respects its power. Her seeming foolhardiness is the meat of future family stories. But so is her modeling of risk and confrontation of her fears.

Poets Pat Mora and Janice Brazil erase the image of older women as powerless. With physical stamina and inner strength, the widow and childless Doña Felicianita builds a house for herself, announcing, “Es mi casa. I am my family....” Brazil’s woman, her face chiseled by time, possesses “Power and perception / from a lifetime of living.”

In “Swallow Wings,” Rosemary Catacalos’ young woman from the “hood” is immersed in gaining that lifetime. She proclaims, “I grew up, folks, and I been down ‘til I couldn’t / get no more down in me.” But still her world keeps saying “and, and, and, and / and.” Similarly, Valerie Bridgeman Davis claims that her courage to dare to live comes from “a wide open heart / Full of power, unafraid / Of inescapable pain.” Surviving a heart attack, she returns to run a marathon. Both she and Catacalos demonstrate the power to continue despite the past.

With the inner strength of the goddess Diana, Nanette Yavel’s “Eve” begins our authors’ poetic trilogy of Biblical women. Burdened by the Devil, she is given her freedom, allowing her to withstand the weight of evil. But Bonnie Lyons’ Lilith claims that she was the first woman, not Eve. Banned from history as a witch because of her feminist claim that God created her at the same time as, and equal to, Adam, she exalts

But the boundless ecstatic
desire to mate
with the world itself
is the source of my power.

Lyons’ Biblical Judith’s life is also ruined because of the danger of her power and independence. As Lilith notes in the poem, each of these women is punished “for curiosity.”

Vincent van Gogh reflected, “What would life be if we had no courage to try anything?” Yet, how little times have changed across the ages. Modern-day Ginger Purdy was similarly spurned for her desire to initiate a Woman’s Chamber of Commerce. Despite disdain by others, she developed skills as a motivational speaker and created women’s networking opportunities for personal and professional ties. Both she and Demetrice Anntía Worley learned that silence abdicates power and maintains women’s status quo. Worley writes,

In the end, we might as well
speak for ourselves,

hold the positions
 we want,
 love ourselves
 with wicked glee.

But can this power within, this need to sustain our real selves, become deleterious to our emotional and physical well-being? With Nan Cuba's "Confessions of a Compulsive Overachiever," we complete this chapter's cycle of personal courage with her evidence that, even with the best of intentions, in giving voice to other women we can risk putting our own needs aside. Cuba created the "Gemini Ink" writers' guild to help her family financially through difficult times. But when she became swept up in the success of "giving speech to women's silence" (Muskie, 2000), her own pain and needs emerged. We learn that woman's power within must be nourished continually.

Crossing Borders

More transparent but also often more impenetrable, the borders that we face can appear immeasurable at times. This final chapter explores some of these boundaries, including societal conventions, racial and religious discrimination, and acceptance of cultures far different from our own. Writers also consider the process of aging and crossing the border between life and death. Once we have established ourselves in new places, we move on to a promise of tomorrow, of the future to come. Naomi Shihab Nye reflects in "Eye-to-Eye" (1980),

For one brave second
 we will stare
 openly
 from borderless skins

as we finally come to know each other while accepting the limitations and promise of our human condition.

Our initial pieces deal with the impact on the lives of children when parents sway far from convention. They realize that their daughters and sons may face ostracism and even physical danger because of decisions made by adults. In Ruth Marantz Cohen's *vie exceptionnelle*, she breaks with conventions and goes beyond the traditional to seek out and enjoy those things most important to her personally. Yet, she shares herself unconditionally with the students in her world, simultaneously modeling self-creation for her daughter, Rosetta.

Joan Loveridge-Sanbonmatsu explores racial and job-related discrimination: If she can move beyond racism and marry a Japanese-American, how can

she explain to her sons why her own parents never attended her wedding and have refused to see their grandchildren? How can she gauge the impact of subsequent family disruptions though six years of intense time spent in legal battles as she fought to overturn discriminatory nepotism rules across the nation, impacting positions and salaries of women university faculty? She models the pain and triumph of our writers,

There is a certain knowledge
that in the end
we will be able to recall and
say that

once in our lives
we gave all that
we had for
justice.

Gail Hosking Gilberg crosses religious borders after similarly painful reflections. In her conversion to Judaism from a traditional Christian family, we see a woman with the courage of her convictions who also impacts profoundly the lives of her children and future grandchildren.

A strong sense of justice permeates Connie Curry's essay, "We Who Believe in Freedom." In 1965, Mae Bertha Carter and her husband decided to send their younger seven children to previously all-white schools. When Curry visits them, "their house had been shot into, credit had been cut off, their crops were plowed under, they were being evicted, and their children were suffering terrible treatment from both teachers and students." But they prevailed, as did author Demetrice Anntía Worley, as she describes her bridge between cultures. Pat Mora writes of the pain of exclusion caused by language barriers, and the humiliation in learning English. Yet, potential outcomes of not pushing forward elevate these women to a new level of courage.

Jean Flynn crosses many borders: poverty, salary discrimination, battles for adequate schooling, all based on a need for human respect and dignity. As with the other authors, the outcomes of her work grace us all. But there is the human factor of anger, one that must be acknowledged and allowed as these authors spend their lives seeking basic rights. Janice Brazil's "Questioning" voices this anger as one of "the rites of passage / a woman bleeds through / in order to feel." Another barrier is crossed: Women giving themselves permission to express their voices.

The subsequent poems follow the journey of illness and the final crossing of death's border. Karen Waldron relates her mother's lengthy passage from

life's concerns to another level of consciousness that envelopes her. The crossing continues as Ruth Kessler poignantly elaborates the pain of those left behind, and Naomi Shihab Nye respects her grandmother's dignity in death. Each poet intimates that there are things about the lost life that we living will never know. Nye suggests that there are parts that they

Wouldn't let us see
because every life
needs a hidden place.

The chapter winds from death's passage to Ruth Kessler's weeping Angel of Love and our need to recover from human errors. Within a realm of potential physical danger, Karen Waldron struggles across cultural barriers by gaining personal understanding of the needs of Iraqi women and their children. Barriers of hatred and personal attack must be peeled away for commonalities to arise.

As it opened, the cycle of the book also closes with the words of Dr. Maya Angelou. Reflecting that each of us has gradually become "a bordered country," she proclaims the words of "A Rock, A River, A Tree" to put war aside. Her words are music to the writers of this book, as they have crossed so many borders and long for a peace to finally be themselves.

Umberto Eco noted, "The reader completes the text." We hope that you, our readers, will complete the text of your own life by following the journeys of these courageous women.

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sources of courage

An Interview with Dr. Maya Angelou

She knew poverty and racism intimately as a child in Stamps, Arkansas, hiding her “crippled Uncle Willie” under sacks of onions in a truck to escape his lynching by “The Boys.” A brutal sexual assault at age eight, with her attacker beaten to death afterwards, sent her into silence for years as she feared the power of her own words. Yet, Maya Angelou learned that words were the way to set herself free. Encouraged by “Mama,” her grandmother who knew that this voiceless child would become a great teacher, she has been awarded 56 honorary doctorates, several Golden Globe awards, and nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry in *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die* (1971). She wrote graphic accounts of her young years in the award-winning *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), followed by scores of books and dramatic outpourings evidenced by her role as the first African American woman screenwriter and director in Hollywood.

Touring internationally in *Porgy and Bess*, she embodied pure musical tradition, crediting her success to listening to “Mama’s voice, like that of Mahalia Jackson,” and to the power of “my inherited art”—African American music. Her passion for social justice brought a close friendship with Martin Luther King, whom she memorialized in her lyrics “King: A Musical Testimony.” But it was her four years in Africa that allowed her to embrace the vibrant history she felt had been lost by so many in America. She writes, “African culture is alive and well. An African proverb spells out the truth: *The ax forgets. The tree remembers.*”

In this interview, Dr. Angelou reflects candidly on courage, exploring life’s dreams to the fullest, and her vision of freedom for all women.

In your life, where have you found the courage to take such phenomenal risks?

DR. ANGELOU: Years ago, I deduced that it costs everything to win, and that it costs everything to lose. So, if I didn’t take a risk, if I didn’t take a dare, then I would lose everything. And if I did take the dare, if I lost—I’d lose the same thing. But I might win. So since everything is always at stake, I may as well risk everything for the good thing.

So when I was asked if I would conduct the Boston Pops, I said, “Yes, of course.” Now it’s true I’ve gone to a few concerts at one time in my life, and I’ve been conducted, and I’ve put together choirs. But the Boston Pops with Keith Lockhart as the Maestro?!! I said “Yes” because ten more years might pass before another woman might be invited, and twenty years might pass before another African American woman might be invited. I said “Yes,” and I got a book and I read, and I found out what music they were planning to play. I put that on my tape recorder, and I played it all around my house. I played it in my bus. I played it in my car. And on that day in Massachusetts, I stepped up and conducted the Boston Pops.

I sent a message that I enjoyed it so much that I’d be glad to do it a second time. But I was told they’d never invited anyone a second time. They had Ted Kennedy there that evening. So I said, “Well, that’s alright then, but I’d be glad to do it.” And I was invited the next year to do it again. So, had I not risked, I could always say, “Well, you know I was invited,” but not what it felt like. Would I have opened the door for someone else who’s coming behind me? No, I wouldn’t have. As it is now, I’ve opened the door and had fun doing it too.

Has this thought that if I don’t do it I’ll never get there, and if I do it I may get somewhere, been a predominant theme for you in taking risks, then?

DR. ANGELOU: Yes, absolutely, since my early adulthood; yes, in fact, late teens. Yes.

What advice would you give other women about how they can demonstrate courage and explore their life dreams?

DR. ANGELOU: I would encourage women to know first that I don’t believe that anyone is born with courage. I think you develop it. And life’s inventions can help you or discourage you to develop courage. If you’re born in a silk handkerchief and all you ever have to do is wonder about powdering your nose, then of course, you may not have to have courage. Of course you may be a lackey and not know it.

But if life offers you difficulties, that’s the time to develop courage. You use each one of the disappointments, each one of the insults, each one of the rejections as a time to develop courage. You don’t develop courage, and all of a sudden you just burst out and say: “I have the courage to do this or that.” I think you develop it the same way you develop muscles. In the physical muscles, if you want to pick up a hundred-pound weight you don’t go there and pick that up. You start with five-pound weights, ten-pound weights, twenty. You con-

tinue to strengthen yourself and sooner or later you will be able to pick up a hundred-pound weight.

I think that a woman ought to start with small things. For instance, don't stay in a room where women are being bashed. If somebody says, "Well, you know that little chic? That little blonde chic's a bimbo." Get out! Don't stay in the room where there's racial pejoratives bandied about which are meant to demean or diminish and de-humanize people. Don't stay in a room where sex and sexuality are a mock. "So the gay ... or straight ..." and this and that. No matter what device you have to use: Get Out!

And once you're out, you don't even have to say anything right away. You may not have the courage to say anything. But Get Out! And then you'll like yourself so much more. Once you're out in the street, in your car, on the subway—once you're out, Wow! I really got out of there. I lied and said I had to be in Bangkok, but I got out of there. And little, by little, by little, you develop the courage. Sooner or later, and probably much later, you will sit in that room and say: "I'm sorry I don't welcome this kind of conversation."

Do you have a dream or a vision for women?

DR. ANGELOU: Well, I have one great-granddaughter and I have a granddaughter-in-law. I have a daughter-in-law and I have so many daughters. So many ... of every race you can imagine. You think only God could have brought those together! And I'm Mom to a lot of people: Asian, Latino, White, African, and African-American, Jewish. Mostly, I wish each one the vision to see themselves Free.

I was married for about two hundred and fifty years to a builder. It was my best marriage. And he taught me to build. He said, "Building has nothing to do with strength or with sex, with gender. It has to do with insight. If you can see it, you can build it. But you must see it."

So I wish women could see themselves Free. Just see and imagine what they could do if they were free of the national and international history of diminishment. Just imagine, if we could have a Madame Curie in the nineteenth century, suppose that twenty other women had been liberated at the same time? Is it possible that we would have gotten small pox and chicken pox and measles and other un-social diseases obliterated? Just imagine, try to envision if, in this country, African Americans were not in a holding position because of racism. Imagine if all that energy and intelligence and enthusiasm could be put to the use of the school system, to the economy: If they envision.

So that's what I wish for women: See it. Try to see yourself Free. What

would you do? One thing, you'd be kinder. You'd give over gossiping. A plague. Yeah, you'd stop it. If you could see yourself Free, you would know that you deserve the best. And if you deserve the best, then you will give the best and you will only accept the best.

Do you feel that one individual can begin to make a difference?

DR. ANGELOU: Oh, I know that one individual can make a difference. I know it because I know so many people made differences in my life. And then, I have gone on to make differences in a lot of people's lives. And so, some of the people who've made the differences for me were an African American grandmother who'd gone to the fifth grade. An uncle who was crippled, who never left the town because he was ashamed of being crippled. But the difference he made in my life and in the lives of others can't even be computed. We don't go that high.

So, as the one person, first you have to start to be good to yourself. All virtues and vices begin at home, then spread abroad. So you must, women must, be good to themselves. First off, forgive yourself for the stupid things you've done. And then go to the person whom you may have injured and ask for forgiveness. If the person says: "I will never forgive you," you say: "Well, that's your business. My job was to ask for it. And I ask it with all my heart and you can't forgive me. I'm finished with it. I've done what I was supposed to do."

But you have to start with yourself first. Forgive yourself. And then see yourself as you want to be and then begin to work toward it. With a will and a way, and with laughter, with humor, with strength, with passion, with compassion, with style, and with love.