

# As time goes by

A quartet of writers connected in a workshop and found their truths together in a collaborative memoir.

By Vicki Addesso, Susan Hodara, Joan Potter and Lori Toppel

For more than 10 years, Joan Potter taught a memoir writing workshop at the Hudson Valley Writers' Center in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y. Housed in a former commuter railroad station, the center is an intimate, beautifully restored structure overlooking the Hudson River. As students discuss their work, they periodically hear the rumbling of the train, a metaphorical reminder of journeys inherent in their writing.

In 2003, Vicki Addesso, Susan Hodara and Lori Toppel signed up for Potter's class. They each had taken the workshop previously, but this was the first time they overlapped. As will happen in such situations, it became evident that the three respected one another's work, and they all appreciated Potter. Over the years, the women stayed in touch.

One afternoon in 2006, over lunch with Hodara in their hometown of Mount Kisco, Potter expressed a wish to start writing about her own memories again. Hodara proposed forming a writing group at her house and inviting Addesso and Toppel to join. The writers were soon meeting every Thursday morning in Hodara's dining room, each reading aloud what she had worked on that week, while the others responded with constructive feedback. Months later, they developed an idea for a book about their mothers.

The result – *Still Here Thinking of You: A Second Chance with Our Mothers*, which was published in March – opens with a prologue explaining why each woman joined the writing group, followed by the four individual "mother" memoirs. In the epilogue, the writers reflect on the experience of writing the book. In the following segments, written exclusively for *The Writer* magazine, the authors consider aspects of their long collaborative effort.

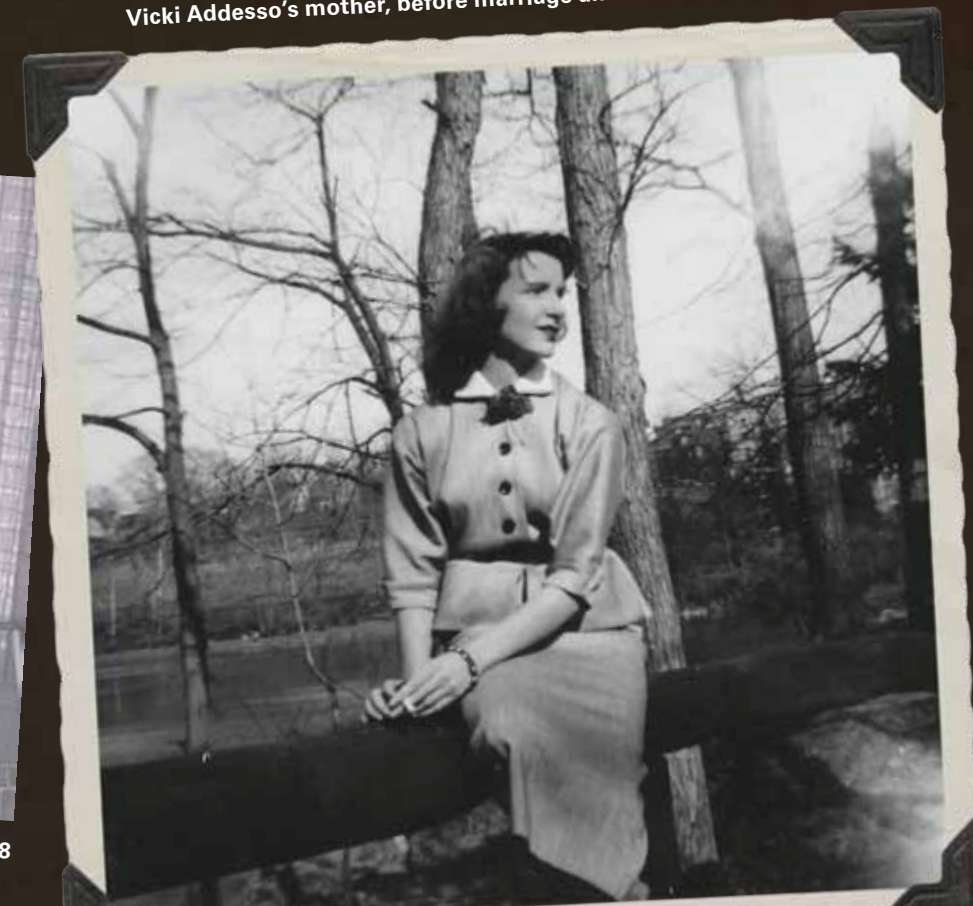
Joan Potter's mother on the front porch of her Tupper Lake home



Lori Toppel's mother on her wedding day



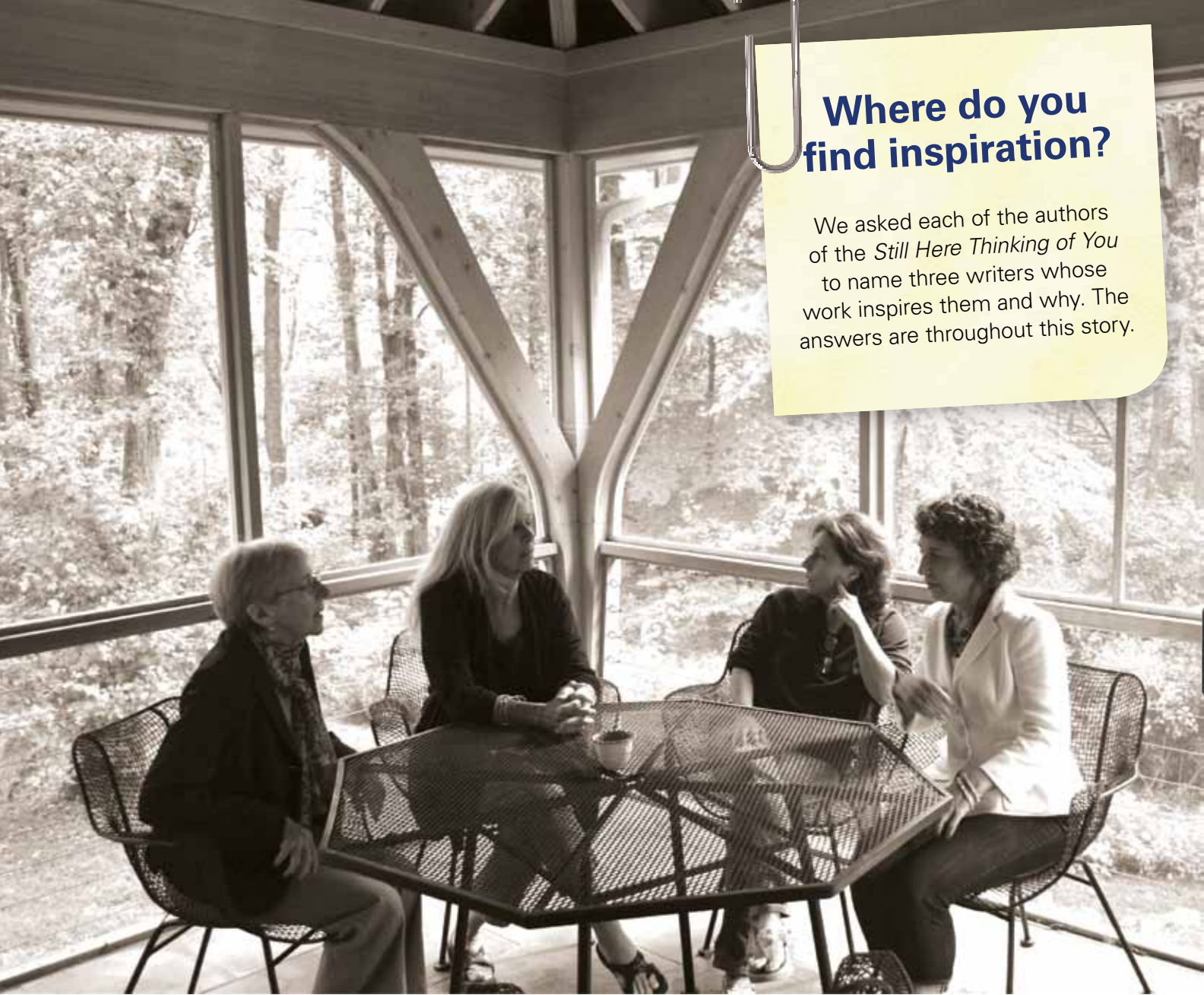
Vicki Addesso's mother, before marriage and motherhood



Susan Hodara and her mother in 1958







## Where do you find inspiration?

We asked each of the authors of the *Still Here Thinking of You* to name three writers whose work inspires them and why. The answers are throughout this story.

Left to right: Joan Potter, Vicki Addesso, Lori Toppel, Susan Hodara

### JOAN POTTER: Learning How to Write

I taught my first memoir class in a men's prison where I'd volunteered to lead a writing workshop. I was a journalist; I specialized in feature articles for newspapers and magazines. I knew I couldn't teach fiction, but I thought of a way to get the prisoners to write.

"Pick out an incident from your life and tell the story," I said to the class. "Describe the place and the people, and try to remember what they said."

The prisoners had gripping stories to tell, and they felt good about writing them down and having other people acknowledge their lives. I used the same technique in classes I taught in subsequent years. "Pretend you're telling your story to a friend," I'd advise hesitant students.

A few years after the prison class ended, my mother died. I

signed up for a workshop, intending to write about her life. But I didn't succeed. "You write as if your mother is looking over your shoulder," my teacher said.

When I joined our writing group I tried to follow the advice I'd given my students. Several months before, my husband Roy had surgery for colon cancer. I sat next to him as he lay on a stretcher being prepped for the operation. As the aides pushed him out the door, a phrase came into my mind: "When your husband is being taken away on a stretcher, the focus of your life changes."

I used this sentence in the first piece I wrote in our group – *In Chemo World* – about Roy's cancer experience. I never would have attempted this memoir without the group. I was not one to sit alone at my desk and write only for myself. Now, with the advice and support of the others, I finally knew I could write about my mother.

### VICKI ADDESSO: The Professional Writer

I saw myself as the "weak link" of our group. Unlike me, the others were published writers; they were professionals. They came to our meetings prepared, ready to share what they had been working on. I, on the other hand, would often arrive "empty-handed," or bring in an old piece that I kept promising to get back to, because I had a million excuses as

Moments with my mother came back, clear as snapshots. I turned them into words, securing them to the page.

### JOAN POTTER

**Abigail Thomas:**  
piercingly straightforward

**Diana Athill:**  
honest and enduring

**Edward St. Aubyn:**  
witty and devastating

### VICKI ADDESSO

**Jo Ann Beard:**  
delicate clarity

**Alice Munro:**  
compact complexities

**Tillie Olsen:**  
shattered silence



Joan Potter's mother as a child, with her father

to why I had no time to write. Sometimes during our meetings, as one of the others read her work, I'd get lost in self-recrimination and doubt.

With time, I learned to shove aside those negative thoughts. I realized it was selfish to concentrate on my perceived inadequacies rather than on the words the others were sharing. It was my job to be attentive, critical, helpful. I also learned to let the laundry sit unwashed another day; to tell my family to figure out dinner for themselves; to call in sick to my job once in awhile to write.

Granting myself permission to write, consistently and seriously, I was able to focus. Moments with my mother came back, clear as snapshots. I turned them into words, securing them to the page. Reading first drafts at our meetings, I hoped to convey something worthwhile. The others' comments and questions roused somnolent memories, sparking new insight. And their advice and suggestions led me to rework the piece and improve the narrative. I left each time ready to use the counsel and hone a rough sketch into a finished story.

Each Thursday morning, we gathered as equals, in need of thoughtful listeners, eager critics. We were professionals, focused on our craft, coming together to help one another move forward.

### LORI TOPPEL: The Work of a Book

When Susan suggested we gather our mother memoirs into a book, I was delighted. Writing a book required the sort of faith and stamina I

thrive on. I'd written a novel in the 1990s, which I was lucky to have published, and another years later, which, in retrospect, I was lucky not to have published. I'd also finished a book-length memoir and was working on a collection of short stories.

With a long work of fiction, I begin by traveling freely around a possible new world. I end up with pages I'll never use, but I immerse myself in the bounty of language, and often the act of writing reveals the story. I never start with an outline or synopsis.

With these memoirs, however, I possessed a map of my memories, resurrecting specific points in time, hearing my mother's voice, even her phrasing, or seeing her bejeweled hand, the one without the cigarette. Scattered details



accumulated. The scene materialized. Reflection came later.

In our group, I learned to recognize the critiquing styles of my co-writers. I anticipated their objections. As it is, I'm never satisfied with my own work, so now and again I had to free myself from all criticism. I'd fall into my fiction-writing habits and wander through my past to investigate those memories that were not so centered on my mother. I'd end up reshaping or even omitting a few pieces, but I was able to extract something of my mother through the digression, and by the next meeting, the group's focus, or one

## LORI TOPPEL

**Virginia Woolf:**  
music of language

**Wallace Stegner:**  
portraits of relationships

**J.M. Coetzee:**  
political overtones

## SUSAN HODARA

**Nicholson Baker:**  
minute details

**Jennifer Egan:**  
unique characters

**George Saunders:**  
unexpected narratives

beautiful scene read aloud by Vicki, Joan or Susan, anchored me again. And isn't that what I love most about working on a book? It keeps me in its grip.

## SUSAN HODARA: Whose Truth Is It?

Truth in memoir can be tricky. Memories are often vague or choppy. Moments as vivid as snapshots might be detached from any context; we recall smells and weather and snippets of conversations, but we forget where we were. And sometimes what we remember clearly collides with a version of events in someone else's mind.

This happened to me while writing our book. I was working on a



Lori Toppel, right, and her mother and sister

chapter about the only time my mother had visited me without my father, a weekend when I was devastated after the man I loved at the time had suddenly abandoned me.

As usual, my memories were sketchy. There were a few crisp images: my mother's back as she headed down my hallway, the two of us having brunch before she left. But so many details were gone.

I am the only member of our writing group whose mother is still alive, and so, during one of my phone calls to her, I said, "Remember that weekend you came to visit me after Darek left?"

"Really?" she said. "I did?"

This significant event in my life had

apparently never happened in my mother's mind. But she recalled an earlier trip, one she said she made on her own after I'd graduated from college. Try as I might, I cannot recall that visit.

As for my chapter, I had to revise the sentence in which I'd said it was the only time my mother had come to see me without my father. My truth had suddenly been altered by hers.

Or had it? After that, I didn't ask my mother any more questions. I let my own memories be my guide. It's OK to throw scraps of everyone's half-finished tales into the stew of a family history. But the only truth I can write is my own. **W**

# from *Still Here Thinking of You*

## LORI TOPPEL: *Las Nereidas*

We strolled through the archway and into the schoolyard, where a row of folding chairs had been set up under the shade of the flamboyant tree and in front of the balance beam. Drinks waited on the picnic tables inside the shack, and my mother and the nursery teacher chattered away while arranging the cupcakes on the tables. I stood in the doorway, staring at the balance beam. Next to it, a metal chair held a phonograph, and the teacher lowered the needle on the record.

The first girl began walking on the beam. Then the second girl; perhaps she was giggling. And then I was up. The beam seemed extremely narrow before I even touched it, as if overnight someone had cut its width in half. I stepped on the bar, spread out my arms, trying to look poised, as my mother had so often taught me. I almost lost my balance. Fear surged through my body. I continued, but, within seconds, tipped to the side. My foot struck the cement. I took off toward my mother and settled like a plume in her lap.

"Bravo! You did very well, Lori, very well. Did you hurt yourself?"

I didn't respond. I watched the next girl step up, while my mother rested my head against her shoulder, for I was, she knew, a lovely dancer.

## SUSAN HODARA: *I Love You Still*

My mother is standing by the dining table where my father, my brothers, and I are seated; she is rigid behind the chair from which she has just risen. I am a young teen. We are mid-meal, food on our yellow and white dishes, silverware poised in our hands. My mother has accidentally knocked over a glass of milk. The noise of its clinking against a serving bowl has halted all other sound, and the air in the room has frozen. The only movement is the slow spread of milk as it travels along the surface of the table and over its edge. I focus on the smooth whiteness.

"What were you thinking?" my father says. His voice is harsh, strained. I keep my head down, my gaze now fixed on my half-eaten tuna salad. There are blueberries in the pattern on the plate. "Why don't you look before you do things?" He is reaching out to interrupt the milk with his napkin. Disturbance surrounds him.

My mother hasn't moved. When I look up at her, I see her eyes are pink and shiny. She turns her head to the side, then walks into the kitchen. I watch her leave; I am pressed flat, too young to identify the pain I feel for her.

## VICKI ADDESSO: *Lies*

There was my father's uncle. I was small, maybe six or seven, when I walked into the kitchen to see my mother pressed up against the closet door by his two tanned hands, with their bumpy knuckles, on her breasts. She was turning her head to the side, avoiding his lips, puckered and shiny-wet. She saw me and lifted her knee, kicking him between the legs, forcing him to back away.

"We're just playing, joking around," she said, taking my hand, leading me back into the living room where the company sat, drinking and talking. Five or so years later, when that uncle came up behind me in the kitchen, putting his arms around my waist and his hands on my new breasts, I remembered what she had said. I couldn't believe she thought this was just a joke. I froze. I waited. He kissed my neck and then let me go just as my father walked into the room. I never told my mother about it. I'd learned: not everything had to be revealed.

There were many things I never told her. With time it seemed I had more to hide than my mother did. I was sliding away from her, keeping her at a distance.

## JOAN POTTER: *Ashes*

My sister Abby carried my mother's ashes from the funeral home in Santa Monica to her house in Ojai. She took them with her when she moved to Grass Valley in northern California, and then to her next home in Mesquite, Nevada. The ashes were in a brown cloth bag she never opened.

My two sisters and I had begun disagreeing the day after our mother died. I wanted to scatter her ashes from a walkway along the ocean in Marina del Rey, a spot my mother loved. My sister Linda said no, we'd have to get permission, what if someone saw us, and anyhow she couldn't bear to see what the bag contained.

The next day Abby called to tell me she'd heard from a chaplain at Santa Monica Hospital, where our mother had volunteered for many years. The chaplain wanted to hold a memorial service for her in the hospital's chapel. I said that was a wonderful idea. But Abby said no, she didn't want people offering her their condolences, didn't want her tears to be on display. To my later regret, I gave in.

There was no memorial service, no spreading of ashes, only the bag of my mother's remains that Abby carried from house to house each time she moved.

