

NEWSLETTER

Introducing Joan Dempsey & LITERARY LIVING



An interview with Joan—her answers and thoughts are provocative and insightful. Enjoy!

Alison: On the first page of your e-book, *The Power of Deliberate Thinking*, is the inscription "This book is meant to be shared." That put a smile on my face as it instantly conjured a vision of you at Antioch (University in Los Angeles), your warmth and friendliness—how you emailed the "newbies" in the pedagogy program and welcomed all. **con't on page 2**



Holiday Writing: 10 Prompts from new WritersWebWorkshop course, beginning on page 3

Joan Dempsey, founder and president of Literary Living, a 12-week, online program for writers, is a graduate of both the MFA in Creative Writing Program and the Post-Graduate Certificate for the Teaching of Creative Writing Program at Antioch University Los Angeles, and in 2008 she was awarded a Maine Literary Award for best unpublished short fiction. Her work has been published in The Adirondack Review, Alligator Juniper, and heard on National Public Radio. In 2009 she was a finalist for both the Orlando Nonfiction Prize, A Room of Her Own Foundation and the Arthur Edelstein Prize for Short Fiction. She was also a finalist in the 2008 Alligator Juniper National Fiction Contest, the 2007 Fulton Prize Competition, the 2007 Writers at Work Fellowship Competition for Fiction and the 2007 Reynolds Price Short Fiction Award Competition, and was a noted writer in the 2006 Boston Fiction Festival. Joan is the recipient of a grant from the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts and a scholarship from the 2008 Key West Literary Seminars. She currently volunteers as the President of the Board of Trustees of the Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance, a non-profit organization with a mission to enrich the cultural life of Maine by supporting writers and the literary arts. She lives in New Gloucester, Maine, where she is currently finishing her first novel.

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Recently, I had to sign a "non-disclosure agreement" for an educational program—which was a first, for me—and it seemed so not in keeping with the spirit of teaching/learning. So your invite to share warmed my heart! Can you talk here about your philosophy behind this? The role of generosity in life/art/learning?

Joan: I've been thinking an awful lot lately about the ideas that are powering the exciting open-source movement in the online world and I specifically got the idea to share the materials I'm creating for Literary Living from Leo Babauta of

ZenHabits.net. Leo made a point of "[uncopyrighting](#)" his material (allowing it to be shared and freely copied and even edited, with attribution) and it created quite a stir in the blogosphere. A lot of people believe it's crazy to give away original material when you could charge for it and get paid for the time you've put into creating it. In some cases this is a prudent approach and I'm all for artists getting paid for their creations. But I'm also fascinated by the concept of the "[Creative Commons](#)", which basically encourages the open sharing of information, with attribution to the creator. Especially in the world of learning I think this is critical, particularly in this technological age we're

privileged to be living in – what better way to share knowledge and encourage learning than by allowing materials to be freely used? Even the manipulation and editing of someone else's material is beneficial – you learn more deeply by delving into the material and making it your own.

Funny you should mention that you had an image of my "warmth and friendliness" because that's one part of why I decided to share the materials; I really wanted to try to convey to an online audience what would be easier to convey in person: that I'm an approachable, friendly, and trustworthy person. Encouraging people to share what I've given them is one way to do this. Obviously, open sharing of my materials is also helpful for getting people interested in the [Literary Living](#) program, too, which is just wise marketing. I've benefited tremendously from this kind of marketing; when I first started looking into developing an online program for writers, I turned to others who were making a living doing their business online, and much of what I learned I got for free – it came from people generously sharing their knowledge while simultaneously promoting their businesses. It's an interesting and effective model, I think, and so far nearly 1,000 people have hopefully

gotten some value out of Literary Living's free materials. I truly want people to benefit from what I give away, even if they don't sign up for the Literary Living program. The program, by the way, is a 12-week online course for serious and aspiring writers to help them overcome their resistance and self-doubt about writing, take control of their time, and create their own unique writing life.

Philosophically, I'm more and more interested in the power of giving things away. Author [Lewis Hyde](#) has written about this extensively in his book [The Gift](#) and now in his new book [Common as Air](#), which is about the history of intellectual property and what we can learn from it in today's knowledge economy. I've just started to read it and am excited to dive into a historical look at how we've dealt in the past with property ownership – I'm curious to learn about the benefits and drawbacks of erecting legal fences around who can and can't access information and what that means for our society, especially our creative culture.

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10 PROMPTS FROM “HOLIDAY WRITING”...

1. Look through holiday photos. What stands out? Look at the background...at what's tucked away in the corners and edges. Can you name everyone in the photos? Is there a forgotten guest? A forgotten gift?

2. Have you ever shared a holiday meal as a last-minute guest, or with a group of people you hardly know? Or invited a last-minute guest? What came of that?

3. What is your favourite holiday song? Why? Since when? What is the song that causes you to grit your teeth? Why?

4. What is your favourite holiday smell? Indoors? Out-of-doors?

5. When you think “holiday,” what relative comes to mind? Why? How is this person connected with “holiday?”

6. School, church, synagogue—have you ever taken part in a pageant, ritual, or concert? When? What happened? What was your role?

7. Can you recall a specific holiday meal? Dinner, breakfast...who was there? What emotions do you connect with this memory?

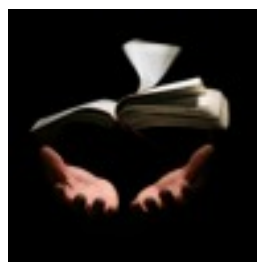


8. What is your most memorable gift given or received? What was it about this gift that causes it to stand out now?

9. Write for ten minutes without lifting pen from paper, about your most disappointing holiday ever—what caused this to be so? And your most surprising? And what caused this?

10. Using wax or pencil crayons or felt markers draw a holiday picture that you might have drawn as a child. What thoughts and stories bubble to your mind as you do this?

11. (bonus) What is the role of “light” or candles in your chosen holiday?



PLAN NOW FOR JANUARY NOVEL WRITING COURSE...

WritersWebWorkshop novel-writing course is 4 months long, and up to 150 pages will be given feedback.. Maximum number of participants is 6, and you offer thoughtful feedback on their work, too...and by doing so, learn so much. But it does all take time, so it's best to begin with at least 75 pages of your own complete, ready to go...a little November/December challenge.

Write alison@alisonacheson.com for info, and start your new year with a real goal!

Joan, con't from page 2

Writers seem to have an incredible gift for sharing their knowledge, experience, and connections with each other. From the time I took my first writing workshop (ten years ago at [Grub Street Writers](#) in Boston), I've felt nothing but welcomed into the literary community and it's been a great gift in my life. To be able to share that gift with others through Literary Living is a true joy.

Alison: And perhaps as a second part to this question: you ARE a community-builder. In your book, you include the works and words of creative people and writers: Leo Babauta was a new name for me, and I thoroughly enjoyed looking through his blog, and know I'll return--and of course, you included the amazing Peter Levitt, who I invited to speak with my pedagogy class at UBC several years ago, and he left the class thoroughly invigorated! Can you talk about this: the role of Community in Literary Living, both drawing in others to the growing process, and also building community among those who take the course?

Joan: This is one of the things I love the most in my life: community and making connections between people. If you know your [Myers-Briggs Type Indicators](#) or the [Keirsey Temperament Types](#), I'm an ENFP, which means I'm an

extraverted idealist, among other things. Nothing makes me happier than being in community with people who are interested in realizing their true potential and living their lives to the fullest. This is one of the reasons I decided to create Literary Living. I've had my own great experience of learning to live a rich and fulfilling life and I wanted to share my experience with others so that they, too, might find fulfillment and satisfaction. I'm a big believer in living what James Baldwin called "the examined life." If I can help other people examine their own lives in order that they can live more fully and passionately . . . well, that's just about the happiest I can be.

The example you share of inviting [Peter Levitt](#) (love him!) to your UBC class is a perfect one: I love helping to make *exactly* those sorts of connections (you'll notice how even in this interview, by providing hyperlinks, we're helping make those connections!). In the Literary Living program the plan is to foster two different kinds of communities: small cohorts (24 people) who are taking the 12-week program together, and the larger Literary Living community of however many cohorts make up the whole. You may recognize that I've modeled this after the university's low-residency program: there's the group with whom you progress

through the two-year program and then there's the university as a whole, comprised of all the small groups. It's in this environment that people meet the Peter Levitts and Leo Babautas (and Alison Achesons!) of the world, and so the connections begin, and continue, long after the program has come to an end.

You and I both know what an incredibly vibrant community existed during our time at [Antioch University Los Angeles](#), where, in addition to the pedagogy program, I was also a member of the MFA in creative writing program. I wasn't ready to give that up when the program was over and so I initiated a regular monthly check-in with three friends from the program. For five years now we've "met" online each month to report on our writing lives, cheer each other on with our goals and successes, provide support when we need it, and generally encourage each other to live the best, most fulfilling writing lives of which we're capable. We've never missed a month and it's been an incredible gift for each of us. I wanted to provide similar opportunities for other serious writers to develop that kind of supportive community, and so I've created the Literary Living curriculum to ensure that people will get to know each other

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during the course of their three months of working together. I'm going to set up another online community for Literary Living graduates, too, so that there's a place to go (free!) for those who want to continue their work together when the three months is over.

Alison: Your focus on MOTIVATION as opposed to DISCIPLINE is wonderful and enlivening! It's like driving a hair-pin turn on a mountain road and catching a sudden breathtaking view of something magical. Can you tell us how you came upon this? And how you've implemented it in your own writing life?

Joan: I've spent a fair amount of my working life in the field of animal protection. In thinking about how we "train" animals, I'm a believer in positive reinforcement rather than punishment. If you've heard of the "horse whisperer" you'll know what I mean. [Monty Roberts](#) (the real horse whisperer) has made his life trying to convince the horse community that "breaking" horses through force is not the most effective way to train them to do what you'd like them to do. Instead he's figured out how to motivate them by speaking to them in their own language and *asking* them rather than *forcing*

them to do his bidding. It's quite something to see if you've never witnessed Monty at work.

In any case, the word "discipline" to me conjures up punitive images, not motivating ones. If I want to develop the habit of staying at the writing desk for an hour every morning, for instance, I'd rather discover what it is that intrinsically motivates me to do it instead of forcing myself – *disciplining* myself – to develop that habit. One way I discovered that discipline wouldn't work for me is by trying – repeatedly – to force myself to develop a daily writing habit. Over and over I tried to write for a set amount of time, every day, at the same time, and it never worked. Getting back to personality types, I discovered through a careful examination of my own personality that routines won't work for me – I get bored very easily and need a lot of flexibility and change to keep me stimulated. Given that, why continue to try to force myself to do something that's against my very nature? Now I'm able to write when it feels right to me and as a result I've written more often, with greater consistency, than ever before. I'm motivated in part by having understood what will work for me and giving myself "permission" to do what works best *for me*, not try to force what might work well for someone else.

Alison: And last: Can you share a time when you received a rejection for your work, and how you dealt with it?

Joan: Ha ha! Which time? Rejection is *such* a large part of the writing life if you're trying to get published and make your way in the world as a writer. The odds are against you, that's for sure. Unless you pretty quickly develop a way of coping with rejection you're going to rapidly give up altogether. There are so many examples I could share . . . one I remember from fairly early on in my writing life. I was a finalist in the *Boston Fiction Festival*, which doesn't seem to be around any longer, and was excited about the chance of being accepted so I could appear at the festival and read my work. In the end I didn't win and I didn't much like the winning short story that year; quite frankly I thought my own story was a lot better. But that's the way of the writing world and instead of stewing about it I decided to attend the festival anyway and hear the winning writer read his piece, which was much better presented orally than it read on the page. I kept on sending out the same story and now it's been published – such is the writing life.

One of my first writing instructors – [Bruce Machart](#), whose first novel, *The Wake of Forgiveness*, has just been

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published by [Houghton Mifflin Harcourt](#) – did something in a workshop that stuck with me: he showed the class his stack of rejections from literary journals. He passed them around to illustrate what we might expect if we truly wanted to be writers. I love how he embraced them rather than let them beat him down and I have my own stack of rejection letters – when I get one I simply file it away and put it out of my mind. Who knows? Someday maybe someone will come upon that file and write about how many journals rejected me before my most famous, award-winning, Oprah-endorsed novel was published!

Alison: Congratulations on an amazing contribution to the on-line writing life! January is the beginning of the first enrollment for the Literary Living program, and I hope to have a follow-up article on the conclusion in the spring.

Joan: Thanks very much, Alison, and keep up the good work at [WritersWebWorkshop](#).

Website: www.literaryliving.com
 Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Literary-Living/121171307935513>

Calendar

November 1-28

Holiday Writing

January 2011

Writing for Children - 8 weeks

Writing for Teachers - 8 weeks

January - April

Novel Writing

January

*Joan Dempsey's

Literary Living - inaugural program

April

Writing for Children/Novel workshops

Elements of Fiction

Poetry

Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."

E.L. Doctorow



EDITOR

Alison Acheson administrator and instructor for WritersWebWorkshops, former instructor at University of BC, Vancouver. Author of **Molly's Cue** and **Grandpa's Music**.