

# CIRCLING Toward HOME

## Reading and Writing Guide

Dear Friends,

This resource is meant to create a conversation between you and *Circling Toward Home*, offering opportunities for reflection, illumination, and inspiration. You may interact with the content during or after reading, either as an individual or as a member of a group. A printable bookmark is available on the final page for easy tracking of the text-based prompts.

Writing with heart,

Sharon

### Universals

Relationships	Conflicts	Themes	Relatability
father/daughter sibling friends partner blended family work nature	alienation loss forbidden love racism religious dogma lgbtq+ grief	letting go transformation coming of age curiosity inquiry self-acceptance love	crisis of faith, low self-worth, depression, power dynamics, generational differences, illness, death, nature and the creative arts as healers

Tie threads from column to column or pick and choose for free-form response.

### Structure

Christina Baldwin uses the metaphor of a nest in her review. How does the structure (parts, poetry, chapters, flashbacks, prologue and epilogue) help to tell the story?

Sketch a structure for a story you want to tell.

### Historical and Geographical Context

1960s	1970s	2015 - 2018
Mississippi racism, Civil Rights Movement Southern Baptist Church	East Texas adolescence, lgbtq+ fundamentalism	California career burnout, retirement homegrown spirituality

Draw a map of your own journey toward what you consider as "home."

## Text-based Prompts

1. "In a moment the world can change. Flashes of bombs or brilliance disintegrate into gristle or glitter and make life something that it hadn't yet been. Civilizations capitalize on it. Economies depend on it. Art expresses it. The dynamism incites what humans call disasters or miracles and what gods call the natural order. . . . Life changes when the world is headed toward darkness, and some things put on a show as they go" (12).

Think about times when your world changed or how things can "put on a show as they go."  
Tell a story of one of those times.

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2. "These details were unknown to me until I researched them myself well into my adulthood. As a six-year-old, the scariest things in my life were the ghost stories that the older kids on the block told on rainy days when we would make forts under folding patio chairs. The monsters of prejudice and hate existed on the invisible sidelines of my life, as cases in my father's F.B.I. files, in the secret plans hatched in Ku Klux Klan meetings, and in the biggest accomplice to the rebirth of the Confederacy, Jim Crow. I didn't have a clue" (29).

Consider a time when you "didn't have a clue." What were the consequences?

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3. ". . .A school-bus yellow bumper sticker on a camper van that I had seen at Dairy Heaven flew like a flag on my mental ferris wheel. Question Authority, it read. First came the bell bottoms, then the transistor radio. . . .With my new cordless connection to the times, I could travel outside of the boundaries that had been constructed for me and get some of my questions answered on the sly. Grownups weren't the only ones who could keep secrets. My parents, neighbors, teachers, and classmates would never have to know all that I could learn without them" (47).

Recall an experience when you questioned authority? Did it serve you or not?

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4. My head turned back toward the fair face of the woman on the bench under the stairwell. She was still in deep conversation. I need to get to know her, I thought, feeling a clean, clear attraction" (103),

Reflect on an instance of "clean, clear attraction."

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5. "As we lay in silence, the stars emerged, practiced as ever, and shared their magic in what is easily the encore of all nature's shows. I bathed in the velvet heavens: star river, a chorus of rising planets and shooting meteors, animated satellites, la luna grande, but mostly space emptying into space emptying into space emptying into me, setting off soul sparks. The star dance or moon jam or whatever you name it held for me a most elemental lesson, one I could carry in my mind's sky no matter my altitude. Simply put: Light lives on" (115).

What sets off soul sparks in you?

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6. ". . .one of the wisest things I did for myself over those months to manage my stress was to have regular sessions with an attentive, wise creativity coach, Cyncie, who counseled me to meet my reality with artful responses. She assured me that "the antidote is always nearby. At a Colorado thrift store, I discovered an old wooden window containing five oblong panes, oozing with creative potential. . . .During the weeks when Trish was in the hospital, the window project became both pastime and passion. I delved into my spiritual journey through painting, collage, assemblage, and poetry. . . .The pleasing result helped me see the road I had traveled in a whole new way. The window was first in a line of creative acts that befriended and stabilized me that difficult year" (119).

Tell the story of a creative act that "befriended and stabilized" during a difficult time.

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7. "What makes the heart know where home is? What outlives the goodbyes, the emptying of closets, the guns hung in parallels above the sofa, the spinning wheel, the grandfather's Bible on proud display? Does every home have its middle of the night fears, its dropped breadcrumbs, its bollweevils? Does every home have its dying vines, its collection of keys that no one will claim? its damaged circuits? its wish to be known? its fate to be forgotten?" (124).

How has your heart known where home is?

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8. "A peripheral effect of facilitating workshops with Patrice was that I learned how to create and nurture sacred space. She insisted on draping our workshop meeting tables with colorful scarves, adding centerpieces of wildflowers and candles, ringing chimes, and scattering quotes by Pema Chodron, Paolo Friere, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Mary Oliver, Wislawa Szymborska and others whose words expanded possibility and deepened introspection. I absorbed these discoveries like a newborn and began to create and tend altar spaces on my own.

My respect for author and mentor, Parker Palmer, had nudged me to explore an organization he had founded, The Center for Courage and Renewal. I registered for an annual season of four vocational recharge retreats in Washington State, and then another, and another. I became part of a Courage and Renewal circle of trust that reinforced the importance of aligning my core beliefs with my actions and of doing that in community with like-minded others. Courage work exposed me to other guides and mentors: Wendell Berry, John Lewis, Desmond Tutu, Terry Tempest Williams, Joanna Macy, and more" (142).

Reflect on guides and mentors who "expanded possibility & deepened introspection" in you.

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9. "The longing in my soul was eased when I spent time in communion with sacred creation. As a guide for my retreat, I brought Richard Rohr's companion journal to *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. In Rohr's contemplative text were journaling questions, experiential exercises, and quotations to assist readers toward reflection, the reason I was there. I responded to prompts like this one: "The very first sign of the potential hero's journey is that he or she must leave home....Can you identify a wound in your life that has opened you up to a whole new understanding? How has it shaped the person you have become?" (142).

Reflect on a wounding that "opened you up to a whole new understanding."

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10. "I had not considered exactly what form the ceremony of farewell to my career would take. I sat with my coffee in hand, staring into nothingness. Something would come to me. Symbolism loomed large as I spotted the bright apple that had inadvertently landed on my altar after my earlier dig into the food bag. My body moved toward the lush fruit with a knife. Before I could even think about what I was doing, I cut the Honeycrisp in half, chopped a number of bite-size pieces, counted out twenty-eight, and placed them in a bowl on the altar. I lit the red lantern from Patrice, bowed to the four directions, and partook of one apple piece at a time for each of the years of my teaching career. . . ." (142-3).

Imagine a ceremony for an ending of something significant in your life. Where would you be?  
What would you do? How would it feel?

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11. "Like a private investigator, I buzzed from hall to hall, trying to learn the language of ICU. Could I speak to the nurses at the station or should I? Could I expect the doctors to seek me out or was I luckless if they made their unpredictable rounds when I slipped out to fill my water bottle or to visit the women's room or to make a call? And which doctor did what and why and for whom? . . . I took down notes about all that was unclear, unexplained, and inaccessible, and imagined lodging complaints when all this was over. I hoarded business cards with a huff. I shouldn't be made to feel like a dimwit at the bedside of what was coming into focus as a dying man. I decided that my job was to pay attention. What else was there to do but that?" (164).

Remember a time when you entered an unfamiliar setting. How did it make you feel?

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12. "I heard myself proclaim like a Southern country preacher in a voice that shook the air, "Be delivered into the arms of Jesus!" JEE-ZUSSS was more like it. I stepped back, knocked off balance by the spirited outburst. Where had that come from? I had been filled by a voice greater than my own" (175).

Recall a time when you spoke or wrote words that felt like they were from beyond you.

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13. "The culling from generation to generation had me on a tightrope strung between opposites, the Trash and the Treasure, extremes held together by the thin line of my judgment about what stays and what goes. . . .Daddy's history was now shrunken to the measure of memories and artifacts that Ellie and I had decided to keep, that which adhered to our versions of the family story, ones that would last at most another generation, maybe two. How is it that so much of who we think we are is waylaid, forgotten? We earn membership in the Great Beyond as dismantled selves, galactic fragments dissolved into nomadic particles rejoining the womb of all that is" (201-203),

Write about "what stays and what goes."

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14. "Certain stories kept circling, every retelling offering new questions, fresh takes, chances to find humor where it hadn't been, dares to be truer in reflection. Writing strengthened the spine, gave the posture needed to look straight into the eyes of what was. . . ." (218).

Which stories keep circling back to you? What do you see in "the eyes of what was"?



	<b>CIRCLING</b> <i>Toward</i> <b>HOME</b>
page	prompt
12	Think about times when your world has shifted. Tell the story of one of those times.
29	Consider times when you "didn't have a clue."
47	Recall an experience when you questioned authority?
103	Reflect on an instance of "clean, clear attraction."
115	What sets off soul sparks in you?
119	Tell the story of a creative act that "befriended and stabilized" you during a difficult time.
124	How has your heart known where home is?
142	Reflect on guides and mentors who "expanded possibility and deepened introspection" in you.
142	Reflect on a wounding that "opened you up to a whole new understanding."
164	Remember a time when you entered an unfamiliar setting. How did it make you feel?.
175	Recall a time when you spoke or wrote words that felt like they were from beyond you.
203	Consider "what stays and what goes."
218	Which stories keep circling back to you?