

SHIFTING GEARS

*Small, Startling Moments
In and Out of the Classroom*

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THE JOURNEY

Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

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Like most good things, this book has been a collaborative effort, the result of many people who wittingly and unwittingly brought these stories to the page. The seeds of *Shifting Gears* took root one quiet Saturday morning during the fall 2001 term. A group of fourteen women, all students in a course called A Writing Odyssey, talked of the joys and challenges of returning to school. Those intriguing conversations moved the five of us to set about collecting stories of remarkable learning in the Rollins community.

The following spring term, we put out a call for manuscripts. Hamilton Holt School alumnae and students sent us stories, essays, vignettes, and character sketches about their experiences on the Rollins campus. Each time the *Shifting Gears* editors gathered to shape the book, the spirit of those fourteen women in A Writing Odyssey filled the room.

Besides those Writing Odyssey students, we owe a debt of gratitude to David Goddard for his photography skills; to Buz Pitts of Pitts•LaVigne Associates for his inspired book cover design; and to Frank Tintillo of C&S Press for guiding us through the publishing process.

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INTRODUCTION

Small, Startling Moments

Stroll along the sidewalks of the Rollins campus around six o'clock on a sultry, September evening. You'll see her everywhere—the “non-traditional student.” Walk down to Harland's Haven, along the gentle shoreline of Lake Virginia, and you'll find her contemplating the shards of light bouncing off the water. Saunter under the Orlando Hall portico, and she's sitting in one of the teak chairs underneath the jacaranda tree, feet propped on the edge of a potted fern, reading a Graham Greene story. Watch closely the doors of the Knowles Memorial Chapel, and she emerges, squinting as she greets the Florida brightness. In the quiet of the Cornell Fine Arts Museum, she steals a moment to admire Rosselli's magnificent *Madonna and Child*. And check out Rita's Rose Garden; she's there too, gazing at the dramatic Sun Flare rose in full bloom. You'll see them everywhere—women returning to school.

They are mothers, CEO's, secretaries, wives, housekeepers, some in their twenties and thirties, others in their forties and fifties, and more than a few moving into “the wise years.” Some are eager to be about their business here; others have yet to shake off the worries of their day. They've had to leave work early, or skip dinner, or hand off child-care duties to a grandmother, a neighbor, a friend. Each has a unique story to tell, a long-held dream to pursue, a personal goal to achieve.

And still, there is a common quality among them: sacrifice. They are all paying a hefty price to travel the sidewalks of this glorious campus. Money, time, family, social life, professional life—all will suffer because of their decision to be at Rollins College at six o'clock on a Tuesday evening in

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September. And shortly thereafter, those few stolen minutes of private time over, each student will turn and wend her way into a classroom, drop into a chair around a large, oval oak table, and open her notebook in anticipation of her entry into the life of the mind—her own mind and its many mysteries.

Many women return to the Hamilton Holt School at Rollins College ostensibly to acquire credentials (for a better job, a raise, a sense of completion), but some experience a shift along their educational path. It's not that they lose their way; rather, their *way* takes an unexpected turn. Instead of dutifully trudging toward the golden ring of a college degree, some women confront the big questions: *Who am I? What is possible for me? What can I become? What is my creative work in the world?* The student pursuing such questions seeks more than a credential. She turns inward, after years of being “other” directed, and assumes a new consciousness. She senses her unique creative potential and seeks ways to nurture that potential. Education, no longer merely a gathering of information, becomes the unfolding of a life lived fully and creatively. What once seemed a short-range goal for career development becomes a long-range goal for radical, personal transformation.

In January 2002, we made a call for manuscripts to be considered for publication in a book about such transformative experiences in learning, asking women to write as best they could about memorable Rollins experiences. The response to our call was overwhelming. Of the many engaging writings we received, we have collected here those that best represent a range of small, startling moments, inside and outside the classrooms of Rollins. Here you will see women struggling to live creatively, expansively, and joyfully in a world

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that often militates against such living. In each of these writings, we are led to insights triggered by a challenging class, a fellow student, a provocative teacher, or a mind-blowing reading assignment. You will see students changed, moved, inspired to fuller, more creative living by their Holt experiences. These are stories of deep learning, and we hope they remind you of the gift we all share in being a part of this rich Rollins community.

In organizing these pieces into a book, we have taken as our North Star a wonderful poem by Mary Oliver, “The Journey.” Her words epitomize the approach we take to education in the Holt School. Learning is a journey, one that does not necessarily end at an obvious point on the map, but seems to meander, stall, or move swiftly toward a series of plateaus and heights and valleys. These pieces represent twenty-one personal journeys, but they have been chosen because we believe they speak for many women who return to school in the face of detours, roadblocks, and rough terrain.

Many of you will feel that familiar tug of recognition at Mary Oliver’s depiction of the “voices around you / . . . shouting their bad advice,” the myriad people around you demanding “Mend my life!” Every year in the Holt School, we see women who have garnered enough strength and enough belief in themselves to step onto the educational path; they knew what they had to do, and began. These stories portray the energy and pride and rightness of that “beginning.”

We honor the authors in this collection. They are models for many Holt women who have determined to save the only life it’s possible to save: their own.

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