

Popular writing workshop returning to Morristown Unitarian Fellowship for fourth time

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[by Janine M. Torsiello](#)



Courtesy of Ellen Schmidt

Ellen Schmidt leads writing workshops like “The Writing Room,” which she is leading in this photo taken on Star island in New Hampshire. She will be bringing this one-day workshop on March 24 to the Morristown Unitarian Fellowship, 21 Normandy Heights Road in Morris Township,

Ellen Schmidt loves teaching and she loves writing, but what she loves most is teaching writing. She'll be bringing that love to the area with her workshop “Writing Room – Connecting Creatively with Yourself and Others” on March 24 at the Morristown Unitarian Fellowship.

The soft-spoken Schmidt has a unique way of coaxing people who didn't even know they could write into being writers.

“Teaching is the part I love the best. This will be the fourth time coming down to Morristown and I love doing that. It's great,” she said in a phone interview.

Schmidt has a strong teaching background, in everything from early childhood level and special education to the college level and community education.

“I really like connecting with people and that's what it's all about,” she said. “Teaching writing is so interesting for me because every single time it's different. Every single time there's so much that each person brings to a writing class that makes it unique and different from any other class. I'm very excited to see how people make their own discoveries and connections about themselves, and with one another, through writing.”

Schmidt especially wants people to know that anyone can take her workshop, whether they have written before or not. “I would say that my definition of a writer is anybody who writes and if they thought that they'd like to try writing and never have before that's a very good reason to come,” she said.

“People are often very nervous to take a writing workshop because they think they have to perform or they're asking 'Will I be good enough? Will other people judge me?' or 'Will I make a fool of myself?' I can just guarantee that that's absolutely not going to happen. I can guarantee it won't, because there's no wrong way to do it. And I think that will help people feel more comfortable about that notion.”

Schmidt, who also teaches writing at Cornell University and in her home just outside of Ithaca, NY, was a German Literature major, but writing has always been a part of who she is. “I've always been a writer since I was probably a pre-teen and onward, filling many journals and writing many stories and so forth. That's always been a thread in my life,” she said.

Schmidt grew up in the Hudson Valley of New York before going off to college at Tufts in the Boston area. While in college she spent a year studying in Germany, where she met her husband Oskar. They have two grown children – a 36-year-old daughter who is a veterinarian and a 26-year-old son, who is a musician. Schmidt lived in Germany for almost a decade after college and brought her family back to the US, living in South Carolina and Connecticut, before settling about 23 years ago in the Ithaca area.

“When I moved on to a sort of third incarnation of life, it became a braiding of pieces together of various strands of life. And the writing had been a continuous strand all the way through” she said.

Schmidt began to teach writing workshops at a summer retreat center at Star Island, N.H., about 10 years ago and then started doing it full time at her home about 6 years ago.

“I did a lot of thinking about what I wanted to move into next and I honestly had no idea. When I left my last job I felt a little like that was stepping off a cliff.” She said it literally came together for her in the middle of the night and she then designed a class that she teaches in the Ithaca area called “Writing Through the Rough Spots” because she began to realize what interested her a lot was how people use writing and creative expression as a way to create clarity about challenging situations in their lives. She said it seems to be where most creative writing begins.

Schmidt set out to create classes that were places where she would feel comfortable going if she were a participant. “I wanted them to be small and places, where people could feel safe and comfortable and warm and supported,” she said.

It isn't something she could do for her Cornell classes but for the other ones she said, “I decided to have them around my dining room table at home because I wanted to have that sense of a kind of intimacy and the ability for people to write in an environment that felt unpressured, that wasn't going to be pushing publishing and the pressure that a lot of times people experience in workshops. I wanted to create something for people to really just let their creative juices flow and write however they'd like. What's become exciting to me over time is creating possibilities for people, the kind of sparks – what a lot of people call prompts I call sparks – that are ways to help people start writing. But they're more of an encouragement and an invitation rather than an assignment. It's a way to get going with writing.”

When she first started out, Schmidt said she worried that “Oh gosh, I'm going to run out of ideas. But

it's been actually just the opposite and I'm just finding ideas all the time, new ones, and I feel very stimulated by doing this and interacting and getting to know people.”

Schmidt usually runs 10-week classes. She said, “Sometimes I meet people for the duration of the 10 weeks. Then I have a number of people who've been taking classes with me continually over several years or who will take classes and then take time off and then come back again. So it's been an interesting way of getting to know people and watch their writing develop in very surprising ways – surprising to themselves. I think often the writer is as surprised, or more surprised even, than the reader by what they write.”

Schmidt said she is much more a process-oriented person than product oriented, though the two things are connected. “I've been intrigued by a lot of things that writers have said about their own self-discovery, their own odyssey, in this journey of writing. One of my favorite quotes is E.M. Forster's “How do I know what I think till I see what I say?” which I just think is wonderful about that process of discovery.”

Another quote she likes is by E.M. Doctorow, “Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.” Schmidt explained, “It's that notion that you don't always know where you're going and it's basic to me in classes, whether it's anywhere – could be at Cornell or could be Morristown or Star Island. Before the class is going to begin none of these writing pieces exist yet, right? And two hours later these pieces come into being and I never find that anything but exciting to me, when that happens. And people don't have any idea that they even exist or that they're going to happen. I find that the discoveries people make in writing are exciting. This comes often through telling a story. Muriel Ruyeyser wrote ‘Life is made up of stories, not atoms.’ Well, we've always told stories to each other, I guess throughout history, and we learn by telling stories to ourselves. We even dream stories when we dream at night and we have a lot to tell each other through stories.”

Schmidt said the half day workshop at Morristown, will be a slightly different process than what she does in the 10-week classes. But she doesn't want to give too much away.

“I like the surprise part of it, as people don't have a lot of time to think about it in advance and they come just ready to write. When I do workshops (in Ithaca) people have a chance to write at home, and they write in class. So it's a different kind of writing when you write in groups with people or when you're by yourself. The kind of writing that will happen in Morristown will be spontaneous writing in a group and there's some kind of magical energy that happens when you do that.”

There are some things that don't change from workshop to workshop no matter how many times she has done them. “People are always surprised by the fact that their writing is so much better than they think it is,” Schmidt said. “And that always happens.”

She wants to make sure people feel safe in her workshops, so Schmidt adds a caveat. “I should say that people always have the opportunity to share and read what they've written, but I always say ‘opportunity’ because I mean that. It's not a must and that takes the pressure off right away as people feel like ‘Oh I don't have to read.’”

Still she is quick to point out that the reading is an important part of the experience for those who feel brave enough to try it even if they don't think they have written anything worthwhile in the moment.

“When they do read I find that people always start by giving some kind of apology like: 'Oh this didn't really go where I wanted it to, it's kind of all over the place.' I call that the FDA disclaimer. Everybody has to do that. Then when they share a piece, they very often discover something. They hear themselves – what they've written – for the first time when they read it aloud. Then they all make the discovery that, 'Gee, this really hangs together a lot better than I thought it did and I didn't realize that.'”

Hopefully, after a while, participants come around to the point where they no longer feel the need to give that apology every time and they begin to joke about it instead.

“Certainly my goal with the writing is that people have a chance to develop a lot more trust and intuition about their own writing, and confidence, and of course, their skills develop over time. Because I don't teach in a formal way but I teach using the examples of what people have written. I think people learn that way well and discover over time what makes for fresh and immediate writing. I do think people apologize less over time. I think they get more and more comfortable. It takes a while to get really comfortable with people but I think that happens fairly well even in the one-shot time.”

Even in the one-day workshop, Schmidt said people begin to really change over the short time they are together. It's something she has come to see over and over again.

“One of the things I think that's so amazing about writing is when you put words down on the page, and when you read them and listen deeply to what others have written, you're creating a link with yourself and with others, in a way that you don't do in speaking or thinking. I think of that process as creating windows and mirrors.

“You see other people and yourself in completely different ways than you would if you took a whole group of people and sat around with a glass of wine in one hand and cheese and crackers in the other and had conversations,” she concluded. “It's a very different way that people express themselves with words in writing.”

To find out more about Ellen Schmidt and her writing workshops, visit her website at www.writingroomworkshops.com. To find out more about the workshop on March 24 at the Morristown Unitarian Fellowship, or to register, email Kate McAteer at katemcateer@hotmail.com. There will be two sessions: 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. or 2 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. The cost is \$30 per person and each session is limited to 12 people. The Morristown Unitarian Fellowship is located at 21 Normandy Heights Rd., Morris Township. The registration deadline is March 20.