

George Ella Lyon | WRITER & TEACHER

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My Story

Growing up in the mountains of Kentucky, I loved words
tree climbing
bike riding
singing
my family stories
dinner
and school.



Photo by Ann W. Olson

Yes, I loved school. Pencils and paper, all those books, kids to play with, colored chalk, teachers, recess, something new every day.

Of course, I loved vacation too. Holidays. Baseball. Cousins. Cornbread, collard greens, caramel icing.



With brother Robert at Mesa Verde, 1953

Besides my parents and older brother, I grew up with all four of my grandparents nearby. Their personalities and their stories – plus the chance to see my parents as somebody's children – were as large in my life as the mountains.

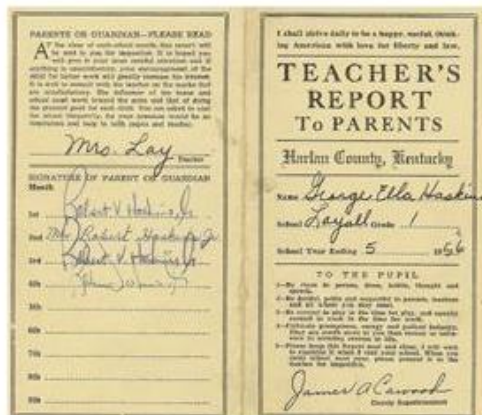
My daddy, who worked as a drycleaner till I went to college, read poems aloud and sang to me. My mother, who stayed at home till I was twelve, then worked for the Chamber of Commerce, played imagination games with me. So I grew up in a house rich with words and music.



Folksinger, 1967

I started writing poems on my own in third grade, plus I took piano and voice lessons and played flute in the junior band. But in eighth grade, when folk music hit the radio waves, I traded my flute and ten dollars for a guitar. Once I taught myself to play, I gave up my previous career ambitions – neon

signmaker, tightrope walker, astronaut, zookeeper – and set about writing songs. Through *Sing Out!* magazine, which published my first essay, I found pen pals in Ireland, England, and Switzerland, and we wove a web of poems and songs across the ocean long before the internet.



Report card

From high school I went to Centre College of Kentucky, where I studied music and English and decided writing was the work I loved most. There I met musician and writer, Steve Lyon, and, though I never became a zookeeper, I did marry a Lyon and raise cubs of my own, Benn and Joey.

From Centre I went to graduate school and began a life of teaching, writing, and raising a family. Its shape has shifted over the years. I started out writing poetry for adults and teaching college; now I write for kids as

well as adults, and my teaching is in the form of workshops, conferences, and author visits.

But it's still words and their transforming music that I love. Words amaze me. EARTH, for instance. Do you see how it has EAR and ART inside it? And that's not all. If you take the H from the end (from the ends of the earth!) and put it at the beginning, you get HEAR and HEART! That's a whole poem in one word:

EARTH
EAR
ART
HEAR
HEART

I believe that's what we're doing when we write or dance, sing or draw or practice any of the arts: we're listening to our hearts and expressing what we hear.

And on the other side of the experience, when we are the readers or the audience for what's been created, we hear someone else's heart speaking, which helps us hear our own, and feel how we are all connected.

Even after all these years, I'm not so different from the little girl I was who loved *Black Beauty* so much she ate raw oats to taste what it was like to be a horse. While bike rides have turned into long walks, I still love

trees
singing
family
cats
stories
dinner
and school-
only now it could be your school
I come to!

If you'd like to read my answers to some Frequently Asked Questions, click [here](#).



Just married, 1972



Benn and Joey, 1988



Childhood home

it all connects

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