



The Valley Scribe



Newsletter of the San Fernando Branch of the California Writers Club

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"We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words on them ourselves. The book is called Opportunity and its first chapter is New Year's Day."

Edith Lovejoy Pierce

Novelist Laurie Stevens Uses Trauma as Her Key Device



Laurie Stevens, author of the lauded "Gabriel McRay" psychological suspense novels, will appear at our meeting on Saturday, January 11. **Please note that this meeting will be held on the second Saturday instead of the usual first Saturday of the month.**



The Mask at Midnight

Stevens will present "Mystery vs. Thrillers vs. Psychological Thrillers. What Makes One Different from the Other?" The meeting starts at 1 p.m. in the Saban Community Room.

During her presentation, she will explore the key elements that separate each genre and how writers can best employ them in their works.

Stevens appreciates the genre of psychological suspense, noting, "I enjoy reading suspense novels and watching the occasional movie thriller. And just as a writer of detective novels is fascinated by the battle between good and evil, I am fascinated by a psychological struggle. Battles between good and evil are waged in our minds as well as on the street. Like a crime writer who creates a hero that 'gets the bad guy' in the end, I, too, enjoy seeing my characters work through their emotional problems."

The Gabriel McRay series focuses on a detective with that name who experienced

a childhood trauma. In the first book, readers learn how McRay's tough exterior masks a broken interior. "Each book chronicles his psychological healing progression. Every crime he solves triggers what point he's at in his recovery. This trigger, while painful, results in him growing stronger," says Stevens. The series has won 12 awards, including one from Kirkus Reviews (Best of 2011).

Kirkus continues to praise Stevens' work, calling her newest installment in the series, *The Mask of Midnight*, "a taut thriller with complex characters and an unforgettable villain."

Suspense Magazine labels the book "The ultimate cat and mouse thriller." An active member of Mystery Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, and Sisters in Crime, Stevens resides in the hills outside Los Angeles with her husband, three snakes, and a cat.

For more information about Stevens: <https://lauriestevensbooks.com/>.

The California Writers Club welcomes writers in all genres, and at all stages of their careers. Monthly meetings are held on the first Saturday of the month.

To attend workshops, programs and other events, or to learn more about events and activities for writers, visit <http://cwc-sfv.org/>.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Bob Okowitz

By the time you read this message, winter will have officially started. December 21 is the shortest day of the year and on December 22, the days gradually get longer. We gain more and more sunshine every day. I like the longer days. It's been rough getting used to darkness arriving at 5 pm.

Many of us have a special religious holiday in December and plans for the New Year on 2020. The same is true for the CWC-SFV. Before I list our 2020 plans, I need to honor a few members for the work they've done in 2019 for the club.

Pat Avery has been the Board Secretary and Treasurer for more years than she cares to count. (Although she's pretty good at math.)

Andy Polk has more jobs than I can keep up with, so I asked her to write them all down. Wow, too many to list here ... Officially, she's our SFV Membership Chair.

I can't forget V.P. Nance Crawford whose energy creates excitement at our meetings. I thank her for taking on our Public Speaking Program.

Rita Brown, our Jack London Award Winner in 2019, helps us practice writing with her pre-speaker prompt workshops. And thanks, Rita, for writing the Critique Corner column for this newsletter.

Michael Rains is our dedicated Webmaster, a tech world I really don't understand. Good thing that Michael knows his way around the tech territory.

Jenny Jordan has stepped into the crucial Critiques Group Coordinator position, and has been doing a great job for us this year.

Lori Hamilton is our Program Chair and has introduced us to these great speakers in 2019: Ari Grigorian (on the structure of a novel), Anne Perry (on Writing Mysteries), Mark Rose (Sci Fi Writing) and Bernard Selling (Helpful Critiques). Many thanks to Lori for taking on this challenging job.

Month after month, the stalwart Alan Wells fills coffee and tea urns and lays out great snacks for SFV members to enjoy before and after the meeting. I especially like the chocolate chip cookies.

Monte Swann assists us with our Audio Visual set-up, another world I don't understand. When a mic goes out, it's Monte to the rescue!

Last, but NOT least, my thanks to Kathy Highcove, the editor of the *SFV Valley Scribe*. I look forward to reading it every month.

In 2020, I look forward to SFV workshops and brainstorming with my board members. My personal New Year's resolution: try to finish my second novel.

I hope to see you all on January 11th—the second Saturday of the month.

-Bob Okowitz



Write on in 2020!

YOUR ATTENTION PLEASE



If we need to contact someone ...

The next time you attend a SFV meeting, select your name tag and take a couple minutes to write your emergency contact information on the back of the name tag. In the event you become ill or have an accident while attending a meeting, we'll know whom to call.

Front of Card

California Writers Club
San Fernando Valley Branch

Your Name
Active
Fiction, Historical Fiction, Poetry
Member Number: 200019

Back of Card

Name of Your Contact

Contact Phone Number

The Right Critiquer Is A Writer's Best Friend

Our December speaker, Bernard Selling, is a published author, a creative writing instructor, and a workshop leader. As he began his talk to our Saban Room audience, he confided to us that he'd been an English major in college.

"I thought I knew how to write," he told us. "I joined a creative writing class, confident of my writing skills, and then read the first critiques of my fiction. Oh, what a shock! They said all kinds of bad things about my story. I was crushed and thought, *I'm really bad at creative writing. I obviously shouldn't be writing fiction.* And so I decided to stay clear of that genre for many years. Then I got to thinking, *Am I really that bad? Maybe I just need a bit of help and encouragement.*

After a passage of time, we learned, an older and wiser Selling decided to give fiction another whirl. But this time, he didn't fold like a collapsed umbrella. He sought out other critique groups and discovered that some people are more skilled at writing critiques than his earlier detractors.

"I found out that I needed better critics—people who were able to show me how to improve," he told us.

In other words, hardly anyone becomes an accomplished writer - in any genre—after just a few years of higher education. An English major might know how to write a proper sentence, how to research, and interpret research for an essay or article. But fiction, or any form of



creative writing, calls for a different skill set. It's a freer genre, for one thing. Fiction writers have few creative boundaries and are free to try new things and push the envelope of composition.

Selling believes that a fiction critic

should not be a pragmatic judge, but similar to a thoughtful therapist. He or she should tamp down the brain's Robert's Rules of Order and think, *How did that story make me feel? What was my initial gut feeling? Did I instinctively love it ... or not? Why or why not?*

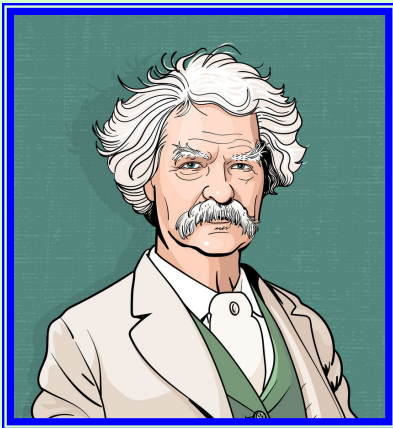
After a follow-up reading, a reviewer should dig deeper and let the author know if he was "in" the story. Or ... did a phrase or discordant dialogue or description stop the reading eye? Did the reader lose focus and fall "out" of the story? An author badly needs that feedback, but not in a negative fashion.

In conclusion, Selling feels that a critique group must be there to help an author dig deeper, uncover true goals and create the narrative that needed attention. The right critique group will help an author feel free to explore her imagination and improve essential creative skills for writing fiction.

Just as an author needs feedback to slowly develop his or her abilities, a reviewer, editor or critic should learn the basic skills of helpful commentary or criticism.

-Kathy Highcove

Word Economy



Mark Twain said a writer should strike out one-third of the words in everything he writes without losing any content. In other words, tighter writing is better writing. And why is self-editing so important? Because real-life editors have limited space for content. Listed below are suggestions for learning this essential skill of self-editing.

Combine sentences

Original: His name was Artimus. He was a crazy friend of mine. He tripped over a garbage can one Halloween evening. **20wds.**

Revision: One Halloween evening my crazy friend Artimus tripped over a garbage can. **12wds.**

Use short openings

Original: Because she was disappointed, she sulked all evening. **8wds.**

Revision: Disappointed, she sulked all evening. **5wds.**

Avoid passive tense in favor of the active

Original: There was a group of teenagers on the bus laughing and socializing. **12wds.**

Revision: On the bus some teenagers laughed and socialized. **8wds.**

Be careful of which and who clauses

Original: The apples, which were finally ripe, begged to be picked. **10wds.**

Revision: The apples, finally ripe, begged to be picked. **8wds.**

Original: Sam, who was my best friend, became a high school dropout. **11wds.**

Revision: My best friend Sam became a high school dropout. **9wds.**

Delete Meaningless modifiers

Original: I was very nervous when I was about to meet the President. **12wds.**

Revision: About to meet the President, I was extremely nervous. **9wds.**

Avoid trite phrasing

Original: Due to the fact that he was lazy and far too negligent in his classwork and homework, he failed English. **20wds.**

Revision: Negligent in his studies, he failed English. **7wds.**

Avoid clichés

Original: She's a person who is dishonest and I'll hate her 'till pigs can fly, 'till hell freezes over, or both. **20wds.**

Revision: She's dishonest and I'll always hate her. **7wds.**

Follow Mark Twain's advice. It worked for him.

-Dave Wetterberg 2011



Time Turns

hours and days circle
around and between
lingering memories
songs that echo
in my thoughts

now it is time

to smear paint on canvas
like a child
in a swirl of colors
a sense of joy
without restrictions

to renew replenish
and also abandon
allow dreams to grow
into reality

to visit the sea
build sand castles
not waiting
for a summer's day
to read uninterrupted
for a week
savoring each word
while the dust settles
where it may
each day

it is time
to cherish the moment
dance and write and paint
speak heart to heart
with kindred souls
enjoy roses in my patio
when other gardens
are too far away

Lillian Rodich

Prompt: The email was sent to the wrong person.

I had just returned home after taking an invigorating walk on a beautiful sunny Saturday afternoon. My wife, Mildred, was having her nails done at a local salon. I had the entire place to myself and was look-

ing forward to eating a sub sandwich, drinking a can of beer and watching the baseball game on TV. She wouldn't be around asking me to vacuum and all of that, so I felt great. Before turning on the TV, I decided to catch up on my email on our bedroom computer.

Most of the messages turned out to be advertisements which I quickly deleted. The email that caught my eye, however, was the one from my wife, which seemed strange to me. She never communicated with me this way. The subject line interestingly read Harry, that's my name. I quickly put two and two together and realized the message wasn't meant for me. She must have selected the wrong email address.

I thought she loved me. I was wrong. She and someone named Roy were making plans to runaway together, but first they had to figure out what to do with me. The two-faced, conniving little ingrate was up to no good. Obviously, she was tired of me. I was twenty years older than her. I guess I wasn't that much fun anymore.

What did I do to deserve this? I slaved

Checking Email



by Gary Wosk

away at my job for years, often sixty hours a week just to make her happy. I volunteered to work overtime whenever it was available to keep up with her wild spending sprees. If it made her happy, that was okay with me.

She drove around in new cars, wore the finest clothes, the most expensive perfumes and jewelry. I made it possible for her to enjoy a care-free life. She hadn't worked since we were married. When she was at home, most of her time was spent lounging around in a house coat holding her favorite drink, a martini. And now what did I have to show for this devotion? Bills up to the kazoo. All in the name of love.

What did I do after learning of their affair and plans to dispose of me? Confront them? No, I emailed my girlfriend, Rose. We decided to fix them before they fixed me.

After reading her email, Mildred became just a sack of manure to me.


There is a happy ending to this story. My wife will never be far from me. I'm always with her when I mow the lawn. Don't worry, she gets plenty of water to make sure she still looks pretty. And, oh, the scent of the woman still drives me crazy.

Prompt: The place I went to last week was ...



Out Of My Comfort Zone

by Mary Jane Atkins



This place I went to last week was a jolt to my senses. Every last sensitive bone in my body was assaulted. I don't know why I let my nephew talk me into this. First, it was the noise. The demolition derby demolished my eardrums. Old stock cars racing and crashing into one another slammed against my inner ear. Mufflers overpowered one another so loudly that it was impossible to sit still without poking my fingers in my ears for protection. I thought my head would split open.

The odorous smell of gas started a long spell of me choking and coughing that competed against the booze-belching fans who smelled like a brewery that had just exploded. Fuel and booze penetrated the air. Too bad I didn't bring nose plugs ...



His Right Hand Man

by Andrea Polk

He stood there in the bathroom, ready to cut off his beard, and the mirror confirmed his mother's criticism: "Fremont, you look scruffy!"

Well, the university has higher priorities than looks, he thought.

His nerdy friends were not at all critical of his long hair or his black over-grown beard. But while on Christmas break at home, he decided to bend to real-world social norms and trim up a bit.

First, he removed the rugs from the floor, pulled off his shirt, moistened his beard and plugged up the sink. Ready for the big moment!

The scissors were on the counter. He picked them up, tried to take his first snip and immediately stopped. "Damn," he said, "right-hand scissors!" He put down the scissors, opened the bathroom door and shouted, "Mom, still got my left-hand scissors?"

"No! You took them with you to school," she shouted back at him.

He never used them at school; didn't even remember seeing them in his room. "Doubt if there are left-hand scissors anywhere in this town," he mumbled. Just then he saw a small shadow move into the doorway.

"Whoa, Tommy, where'd you come from?"

"Heard you guys shouting," his six-year-old nephew said. The boy stood there, wide-eyed, hands jammed in his pockets, as if anticipating some exciting situation.

"What's the problem, Uncle Fremont?"

"I'm left-handed and these scissors are for right-handed people. Can't cut my beard with ..., hey, are you right-handed, Tommy?"

"Think so. I write with...", and he pulled his right hand out of his pocket, "this one."

"Know how to use scissors?"

"Sure. I cut paper with them. Cut my own hair with 'em once. That got me into trouble and a big time-out."

"Let's try. Here, take the scissors and be careful you don't stab me or cut off my nose or chin. Start with little cuts. This much beard." Fremont held out about one



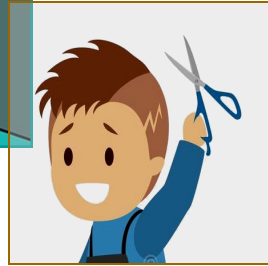
half inch of his beard.

"Okay, but first I gotta get my stool from the kitchen," Tommy turned to leave.

"No. I'll just sit here." Fremont sat down on the edge of the tub. "Good. Now I'm at just the right height for you."

The boy approached Fremont slowly, poking the scissors into the mass of black coarse beard. "Now?" he asked.

"Now, dude! Do it!"



Black beard tumbled to the floor and Tommy watched the hair float down to the top of his uncle's shoe. Fremont got up to look in the mirror.

"Good. We're a team. You're my right-hand man." He looked over at placid Tommy. "Literally," he said, and grinned.

The boy stood tall and continued to snip under Fremont's directions and frequent mirror checks. After lots of laughs and chatter the job was completed.

Tommy stepped back and looked at his clipped uncle. "When do I get to grow a beard?" he asked.

"How old are you?"

"Six and nine months."

"In about ten years, I think."

"Uh, oh. Your beard's all uneven. Looks bad."

"Oh, it's good enough now for me to shave it all off with a razor,"

"Can I watch?"

"Sure."

His nephew quietly watched the preparations for shaving, then he said, "Uncle?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't think I'll grow a beard."

"Why not?"

"Too much work to cut it off. Oops. Gotta go now. I hear Mom calling me."

"You were a great help, Tommy. Thank you."

"Show me when you're done," the boy replied and quietly closed the door.

Priceless Magical Moments

by Claude F. Baxter

(excerpted and modified from autobiographical writings)

In my youth I experienced magical moments when encountering the incredible beauty of nature. Many years later I rediscovered those same feelings of awe and wonder while on a family camping trip.

For example, I sensed such a unique feeling when standing in complete silence under a black starlit sky, surrounded by the grasses of an unspoiled meadow with insects chirping and buzzing all around me.

The feeling of that magical moment was mine and mine alone. It could not be shared with others. I felt that trying to express my feelings aloud would break the silence and dissolve the magical spell.

Similarly, when I stood in a grove of thousand year-old redwood trees and looked upward toward the top of their spires high in the sky, I suddenly had a feeling of deep reverence for the ancient giants. I shared that moment with my wife Eleanor. She spoke for both of us when she exclaimed, "This place makes me feel more religious than any grand cathedral we visited in Europe!"

Yes, a feather blowing in the wind, the silent stalagmites in a cavern, a cascading waterfall, or the reflective waters of a mountain lake, all can have a mystical aura all their own!

Nature's majesty has often manifested itself on our family camping trips. For example, early one morning on a camping trip in coastal Northern California, one of our three children found a really large slug the size and shape of a banana. It glistened in many colors as the sun's rays reflected from the surface of its wet, black skin.

I had read that such slugs were used for medicinal purposes by the American Indians. Here was a creation of incredible beauty that I had never encountered before.

Yet to some family members, it appeared to be a horrible giant black turd. Even my wife could not be totally objective. Having killed hundreds of little slugs to protect the flowers in our garden, she had no special affection for gastropods!

As the slug greased its way back into the damp



underbrush, I then felt it my responsibility to extol the virtues of this black giant. It is dubious that at six a.m. I was able to praise the wondrous creature with as much enthusiasm as I felt the occasion demanded. But encountering that slug was—for me—a magical moment.

On another occasion, we camped near the shores of a lake in the vicinity of Yellowstone and GrandTeton National Parks. When we visited the lake in the morning, the gray fog still lingering over the water, a flock of waterfowl suddenly rose in unison from out of the heavily reed-covered shoreline and disappeared into the fog.

What secret sign, I wondered, had impelled the birds to take wing at the same moment? Did they all know their destination? Here was an intricately complicated community of animals that evolved precariously alongside humanity, governed by laws about which I knew very little. To this ignorant viewer such a manifestation of coordinated nature was wondrous and beautiful to behold. It represented a true magical moment.

Finally, I recall when we camped near the Russian River in California. At a time when most of the family was still fast asleep, I saw a family of raccoons, the parents in the lead and about five young ones following the adults single file.

Where are they going? I asked myself. Then my question was answered by a loud clatter. Momma and Papa Raccoon had taken the young ones along to show them how to raid garbage cans! The mess we later encountered was sensational.

How did those animals know that this one morning the cans were unlocked? Communications by non-verbal means had given them that vital piece of information. Somehow I felt elated. In spirit I had joined the raccoons on this adventure.

Slowly it dawned upon me that becoming privy to nature's wonders is like learning a new language. When on camping trips, that new language exposed me to feelings that were unique and provided magical moments obtainable by few other means.

Those moments are certainly priceless.

It is bitter cold and dark outside at 5:30 am. and I am wrapped in a weary terry cloth robe. Flannel pajamas that have a black and white crossword puzzle motif cover my stiff extremities. These pajamas belonged to my mother who was wickedly talented at crossword puzzles well into her 90's. I miss her and her word-smithing this time of year. I sink into the old wine-colored overstuffed chair in the upstairs guest bedroom directly in front of the French doors that open to a tiny balcony. With my wreck of bed hair, I face east and sit half-awake reading an insightful book about 'Spiritual Direction.'

Just outside, the old wooden balcony railing has been carefully draped ...*no that is way too artistic and formal...*has been strewn willy-nilly with mangled strands of Christmas icicle lights that hang twisting off the edge of the slightly pitched railing. They are desperately held to the rotting wood posts by plastic twist ties and duct tape. I risk life and limb every year as I crawl out on the balcony and hope the aging floorboards support my annual pre-holiday weight gain.

In this morning's darkness the twinkle of little white lights seem so magical as they shimmer in the predawn winds. I still respond with childlike awe when I am under any glow of twinkling luminaria during each Christmas season. I hesitate to admit that pretty shiny things pull my focus as I attempt to keep a spiritual mindset and attentiveness to all things holy during the holidays.

As dawn breaks boldly outside the long windows in front of me I sense a dichotomy in my view from this perch. As the rising sun slowly illuminates the balcony and me, and the night's dark cape lifts degree by degree off the horizon, the rangy twinkle lights have become dimmer and dimmer against the majestic boldness of the sunrise. The morning's natural spotlight reveals that barely half of the twinkle lightbulbs are actually working. What is with this sinister nature of hanging lights that work until just after you've climbed down off the ladder and put away your tools? Mine hang there dismally ineffective and contribute nothing to what I thought in the dark was my artistic touch of Christmas wonderland.

Soon my view of the immense sky presents an ornate tapestry of changing tones of royal purple and electric blue velvet damask. Aria's of piercing pinks and corals reflect against a chorus of sashaying white clouds that enter and exit across this operatic stage. It is a display of God's hand-made invitation to His Advent day with me in this intimate sacred space. I ponder why the word adventure begins with advent?

The twinkle lights have now faded to nothingness as they are overwhelmed, as I am, by the God of Love's perfect and purest light. I begrudgingly sense the inspirational limits of a man-made, \$5.99, 10-foot strand of twisted plastic lights assembled overseas. They will easily give up their magic after a brief Holiday run and are destined to join bags of torn wrapping paper, emptied and crushed gift boxes and spoiled party buffet food in the dumpster.

I look beyond my sagging old balcony, laboring under its cheery facade and picture God's angels millennium miles away, preparing on one special evening the hanging of authentic twinkle lights to adorn the night sky. A crystal beaded veil for an eager bride waiting for that famous fiery comet, signaling her long-awaited groom has arrived.

I whisper to the Messiah, *Come. Please distract my attention, tickle my childlike awe of the gift of Peace in our world that I've always wanted more than a new bike. Make me look beyond this comfortable but constricted worldly view I insist upon.* The Morning Star and I hold each other's gaze as we embrace the Advent-ure of what this illuminated day may hold – and *my* part in creating that Peace.

Insights from three experienced SFV writers ...

Writer's Trash

I don't agree.

hidden in those papers there might
be some memorable lines
or a mascara darkened tear drop
or a fresh lipsticked
mouth print
in passion's guise

pen and paper
disappointment
smooth out the wrinkles
and look again

or turn away
and sigh defeat

Lillian Rodich 1/18

Writing is part of my being, thinking - my very existence. Reliving the best and worst moments in life with people who left their mark on me... like a permanent tattoo...makes me take pen in hand. Hopefully, what I write will make others laugh, cry and relate to experiences in their own lives.

My writing style is meant to be conversational and simple... like I'm a "Once Upon A Time" storyteller. So while I'm still here, while my memory is still in tact, I'll keep on writing, telling and printing my personal little gems. Maybe my writing will inspire others.

Leslie Kaplan January 2011

The Wright Word – by Ray

Art and Artifice

Those of you who kindly take the time to read this column know that I know very little. I have opinions, but that's all they are.

You also know that I am an occasional poet. As such, I constantly puzzle over the issue of 'form.'

I look on writing as *Art*. That's a really heavy label for my scribblings to carry. So what kind of onus do I feel this appellation imposes?

My definition of 'Art' has always been, "Inspiration constrained by discipline." Certainly, without inspiration, a work must be without the 'universality' that must be part of 'Art.' And without discipline, inspiration becomes little more than a formless "howl."

But how to mingle the two?

I was raised on 'formal' poetry: Meter, Rhyme, Structure. Yet, I am aware that over-attention to these elements can cripple a work.

On the other hand, I read a lot of poetry that is so formless and ill-thought-out that the result is like a one-minute egg. The nourishment may be there, but the dish is gooey and un-appetizing — a mess that, with a little more time and care, could have been a meal.

The human mind automatically imposes structure on what it perceives. Skillful organization of thoughts and ideas can delight it: an unexpected repetition or rhyme. A seductive cadence, an eccentric juxtaposition of images, or just an unbroken golden thread for the imagination to follow.

But when these things become the entire *raison d'être*, when they call attention to themselves, the entire work becomes trivial, a clever, shallow trick.

Extra words or superfluous syllables — inserted solely to make the meter of a line scan well — detract from the actual content. Short rhyming lines that, inappropriately, pound the ear scream out, "Look how clever! I'm rhyming!" and reduce a poem to the level of a cheap greeting card. In particular, the perversion of sentence structure just to achieve a rhyme (for some reason, so common in Christian hymnology) trashes a poem. ("What a blessing it will be, when the face of God I see." Who would spontaneously SAY that?!)

Yet, done skillfully, these things can seem like the most blessed of accidents — the hand of the Muse imposed on conversation.

I suppose, in the end, it is the perception of the reader that matters. One person's kitsch is another one's treasure. But I do exhort you to do your best. Remember that a 'finished' work represents "the best I can offer." Ask yourself, "Is it?" -mm-

Ray Malus January 2011

January 11, at 1 pm, join the members of the CWC-SFV in the Community Room



photo by Ester Benjamin Shifren

We'll gather at the Saban Center for Health and Wellness

**Location: the MPTF
23388 Mulholland
Woodland Hills, CA 91364**



The SFV Board and Coordinators wish you a Happy New Year!

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