

South of the Garden

The Newsletter for the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South

Volume 26, Number 1

April, 2005

Spring

by Jeanette Stokes

It is spring and things are hopping at RCWMS. We have three big programs underway that fall under the broad category of creativity and spirituality: Art & the Feminine Divine, the Meinrad Craighead Documentary Project, and Women & Writing. I'll describe them.

ART & THE FEMININE DIVINE

RCWMS has launched a creative exploration of the feminine divine through visual art, music, movement, and storytelling. We expect to be surprised, invited, intrigued, and inspired by the many and varied feminine faces of the divine. The experientially based exploration will include:

- An exhibition of art about the feminine divine in 2006
- Workshops in art, music, and storytelling in 2005-06
- Musical performances and craft sales
- Grants to artists
- An hour-long video about Meinrad Craighead

The project is the brainchild of Mary Love May who approached us a year ago, hoping we might help to create a project that would carry some of her mother's spirit. Her mother, Mary Shaw May, now 83, lives with Alzheimer's disease, silent but still shining, in a retirement community. She is no longer able to speak a clear sentence, but once she wrote poetry, essays, and stories about Earth and Spirit, women, and her own life.

In the 1970s, Mary Shaw and other Episcopal churchwomen in Gainesville, Florida, organized a conference called *WomanSpirit Rising* to celebrate the creativity of lay women, to appreciate feminist theology, and to honor women entering the priesthood. The Art and the Feminine Divine project will continue the same sacred impulse, with an even wider focus.

MEINRAD CRAIGHEAD PROJECT

"One day I was sitting in a classroom at Duke University and God got bigger—a lot bigger." That's how Amy Kellum describes the first lecture she heard by visionary artist Meinrad Craighead. That day, Amy's imagination exploded with possibilities about who God was for peoples of the past and who God could be for us today.

Amy attended one of Meinrad's four-day workshops in Albuquerque a few years ago to learn more about Meinrad's research into the divine feminine. Later, when she pored over books by and about Meinrad, they did not include all that she had learned from Meinrad's lectures. That's when she had the idea that Meinrad's teaching could be captured on video.

Amy took classes at Duke's Center for Documentary Studies to learn the technical side of video production and was soon following Meinrad around the county to videotape her lectures. Certain that she was onto something bigger than she could handle, she approached RCWMS for support and got Georgann Eubanks and Donna Campbell of Minnow Media involved. The Meinrad Craighead Documentary Project was born with a one-hour broadcast-quality video about Meinrad as its first goal.

(Continued inside.)



Chances

We are pleased to announce the winners of the 2004 RCWMS Essay Contest. First place goes to Joyce Hollyday of Asheville, NC for her essay "Second Chances," which is printed below. Liz McGeachy of Norris, TN won second place. Third place was awarded to both Sally Hicks of Durham, NC and June Ellen Haslip of Eden, NC. You will see some of these essays in future newsletters. The Essay Contest is made possible in part by a grant from the Clifford A. and Lillian C. Peeler Family Foundation.

Second Chances

by Joyce Hollyday

Light streams into the room from all angles, flooding every pocket of space with a dancing radiance and embracing warmth. On three sides, the walls are nothing but glass. I stand alone in the center.

From a corner a man and woman approach. He holds a large burlap bag, of the sort that contains seeds or grain. "Will you carry this sack across the river for us?" he asks, smiling. I hesitate. He drapes the sack across my arms.

I turn and walk through the door that opens before me in the glass. I discover that the room I am leaving is perched against a sheer rock face. Far below is the river, rushing through a deep gorge. But the only path, a narrow ledge, leads up.

Near the top, I see that it ends at a waterfall that plummets into the gorge. Just above the waterfall, spaced far apart and surrounded by churning water, are stepping stones that lead to the other side. I breathe deeply and step out precariously. The stones wobble, and I have to drop the sack to avoid losing my balance and plunging over the waterfall. I watch the sack fall far below me and disappear.

I inch my way back to the house, rehearsing my apology as I go, relieved when once again I am enveloped by the warmth and security of the sun-flooded room. I open my mouth to speak, but the man tenderly motions for me to keep silent. The woman steps toward me. She holds a large bowl. It is handmade pottery, rich in glazes and colors—deep shades of blue and burgundy with veins of turquoise and accents of gold—an exquisite work of art.

"Will you carry this bowl across the river for us?" she asks. Before I can refuse, she places it in my arms, and I am back at the top of the waterfall. Once more I falter, and I watch with horror as the bowl smashes apart on the rocks and falls in pieces down to the river and out of sight. I feel shame, and then anger at having been asked to repeat my failure.

Back in the room, the man and woman once again gently deflect my apologies. They walk together toward me. The man is cradling something small, wrapped in a blanket. "Will you carry our baby across the river for us?" he asks. From somewhere deep within me a whisper of protest begins to build to a plea, but before I can voice it, the woman tenderly speaks my name—and then, "Take the baby." The man, smiling warmly, places the baby into my outstretched arms.

This dream visited my sleep one night when I was broken in heart and spirit, wrestling a powerful emotional undertow of grief and self-doubt. I had just left a 15-year ministry focused on social justice activism, writing, and speaking with an intentional community in

(Continued on back.)

Calendar

April 23, 2005, 9:30 am–4:00 pm

WOMEN OVER SIXTY

Durham, NC

A day for women over 60 to share experiences, compost life's lessons, and name possibilities for the future.

Leader: Anita McLeod

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: \$45

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

May 3, 2005, 9:00 am–4:00 pm

MINISTERIAL RETREAT DAY

Windsong Retreat Center, near Pittsboro, NC

Silence and renewal for lay and ordained ministers.

Cost: \$67

Contact: 919-542-2611, www.windsongretreat.org

May 6–13, 2005

SPRING WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Unstructured week of writing at the beach for women.

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: \$550, includes room and meals

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

May 10, 17, and 24, 2005 (3 Tuesdays, 6:30 pm–8:30 pm)

WOMEN TELLING OUR STORIES

Raleigh, NC

Explore stories through writing, telling, and moving.

Leader: Judith Valarie

Cost: \$45, with some scholarships available

Contact: Judith Valarie, 919-233-9777

May 20–22, 2005

PRAYING WITH IMAGES: Creative Retreat for Women

Albuquerque, NM

Leader: Meinrad Craighead, visionary artist

Cost: \$550 plus housing and meals

Contact: Meinrad Craighead, 505-344-7109

May 26, 2005, 7:00 pm

READING BY SUE MONK KIDD

Meredith College Chapel, Raleigh, NC

Kidd will read from her new novel, *The Mermaid Chair*.

June 10–12, 2005

THE SHAPE OF YOUR DAYS: Goes to the Beach

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Let the rhythm of the tides help you strengthen your relationship with time and create a better daily schedule in the future.

Leader: Julia Scatliff-O'Grady

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: \$295 single, \$260 double, includes room and meals

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

June 17–19, 2005

PRAYING WITH IMAGES: Creative Retreat for Women

Albuquerque, NM

Leader: Meinrad Craighead, visionary artist

Cost: \$550 plus housing and meals

Contact: Meinrad Craighead, 505-344-7109

July 21–24, 2005

INTERPLAY SUMMER UNTENSIVE

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Play in an affirming, embodied community.

Leaders: Ginny Going and Tom Henderson

Cost \$425 for tuition, housing, and meals

Contact: Ginny, interplaync@nc.rr.com, 919-821-3723

July 29–31, 2005

WOMEN'S JOURNEYS: Wisdom, Wonder, Celebration

Sinsinawa, Wisconsin

Leaders: Mary Cartledgehayes, Deb Engle, and more

Cost: about \$400, includes room and meals

Contact: www.goldentreeco.com, 515-462-4004



August 6–11, 2005

BEING CHANGE: The Way of the Activist

Taos, NM

A retreat of reflective spiritual practice for activists.

Leaders: Claudia Horwitz and Jesse Vega-Frey

Sponsor: stone circles

Cost: \$465–\$515

Contact: 919-682-8323, www.stonecircles.org

August 12–16, 2005

WOMEN IN BLACK CONFERENCE

Jerusalem

Cost: \$200 for program, room & meals.

Contact: www.coalitionofwomen.org

September 3–6, 2005

SECRETS OF INTERPLAY

Wellspring Retreat Center, Washington, D. C.

Learn techniques and principles of an embodied life.

Leaders: Ginny Going and Tom Henderson

Cost: \$550 tuition, housing & meals

Contact: Ginny, interplaync@nc.rr.com, 919-821-3723

September 8–11, 2005

A MINDFULNESS MEDITATION RETREAT

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Leader: Therese Fitzgerald, longtime student and meditation teacher in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: \$350 single, \$290 double, includes room and meals

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

September 23–25, 2005

PRAYING WITH IMAGES: Creative Retreat for Women

Albuquerque, NM

Leader: Meinrad Craighead, visionary artist

Cost: \$550 plus housing and meals

Contact: Meinrad Craighead, 505-344-7109

September 26–29, 2005

SOLATIDO: Retreat for Writers of Song, Poetry, & Prose

Wildacres Retreat, near Asheville, NC

Cost: \$225, includes room and food

Contact: www.solatido-workshop.net

September 30–October 7, 2005

FALL WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Unstructured week of writing at the beach for women.

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: about \$550, includes room and meals

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

October 7–9, 2005

TARA MEDITATION RETREAT

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Leader: Rachael Wooten

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: about \$275, includes room and meals

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

October 22–29, 2005

CONVERSATIONS IN FLORENCE, ITALY, ON ART & SPIRITUALITY WITH MEINRAD CRAIGHEAD

Conversations with Meinrad Craighead and museum

trips with Lydia Ruyle. Optional creative studio work.

Cost: \$1,500 plus travel, lodging, and meals

Contact: www.meinradcraighead.com

December 2–4, 2005

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE: Silent Retreat for Women

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Leader: Jeanette Stokes

Sponsor: RCWMS

Cost: \$270 single, \$230 double, includes room and meals

Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

Over 60

by Anita McLeod

It is a cold morning in March and I am sitting on a hard grey metal folding chair in the large parlor of a funeral home in northern New Jersey. There are no windows in the dimly lit room. The pale blue walls and rose carpet soften the sounds of people whispering and weeping. Colorful sprays of mums, roses, and lilies surround the satin lined open casket holding the body of my only sibling, my brother Paul. He was only 61 years old when he suffered a massive heart attack and died instantly at his home. I am overwhelmed with grief and loss and shock. No chance for goodbyes. I am now the sole survivor of my family of origin.

As the tears roll down my flushed face, I look around the parlor for familiar faces and realize all the elders, my aunts and uncles and my parents, are not here. They have passed on. All of them. Tante Solveig, Uncle Anton, Tante Astrid, Uncle Oscar, Tante Esther and Uncle Conrad as well as my parents, Catherine and Arne Swensen. A whole generation is gone. All the old folks are dead. They had always held up the sky for us children. Now my two cousins, Greta and Anton, and I are the elders. We are the old people. I feel not only the loss of my brother, but also the loss of my family and my youth. How did this happen so quickly? I am 65 years old and there is no one between death and me. I have been pondering many questions about aging since I became 60, and Paul's death jolts me, bringing a sharp focus to my quest.

Entering my sixties has felt like walking into a strange new territory. I have crossed the threshold of middle age into a new land without a map or a guide. What does it mean to be an elder? How do I stay conscious in this new land? What is my soul's gift to the community? How do I restore and rejuvenate myself so that my voice and actions are authentic? I know I cannot do this alone. I know that I am closer to death than I have ever been.

Last April RCWMS sponsored a workshop, "Women Over Sixty." I created the workshop because I wanted to have meaningful conversations with women near my age who might be asking questions like mine. During the course of the day we shared our sense of physical vulnerability and our strong desire for health and independence. Some of us spoke about our freedom from caretaking, while others had new responsibilities caring for elderly parents or grandchildren. We considered our feelings about how we use time. Most of us said we wanted more quiet time for prayer, contemplation, and reflection. We shared our vulnerabilities, our strengths and our yearnings. We also began the process of harvesting wisdom, collecting what we have learned from our life experiences that we can pass on to others.

For several years I have been asking myself Mary Oliver's question, "what is it I want to do with the rest of my one wild and precious life?" I now realize that before I can answer that question, I need to accept that I am mortal and will die one day. This is not a new thought, it just feels more real since my brother's death. I want to be connected to my soul when I die, and even more than that, I want to be connected to myself while I live. This is my journey now: To deepen my relationship to my soul and carry my soul with me into each day. To do that, I need solitude and a "community where it is safe for soul to show up and speak," as Parker Palmer says in *A Hidden Wholeness*. I am grateful to the women of the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South who provide a community for me and a container in which to explore these soulful issues. I invite those of you who are sixty or older, who are interested in exploring some of these questions, to come and be part of the next Women Over Sixty workshop on April 23. (See Calendar for details.)

Anita McLeod is a retired nurse, a health educator, and the chair of the Board of Trustees of RCWMS.

Spring...

The video will provide an introduction to Meinrad's lifelong pilgrimage and her mystical encounters with the Divine Feminine. As she explains the dreams and shamanic journeys that have often been the inspiration for her art, viewers will be introduced to images of the Divine Mother from around the globe and throughout human history.

The video will cost nearly \$175,000. (I had no idea how expensive broadcast-quality video was to make.) As you might imagine, we are busy looking for major sources of funds for the project. A preliminary, ten-minute video about Meinrad, that Amy made during her documentary training, is available to those who want to learn more about the project. If you are interested in giving or finding support for this effort, please be in touch.

For more information, contact Amy Kellum, AK@meinradproject.org. For information about Minnow Media, go to www.minnowmedia.net.

WOMEN & WRITING

Women & Writing is a program that encourages women to find their own voices, to write and to share their words with others. The writing program began in 2002 when Nancy Peeler Keppel came to us with an idea. She wanted us to start a program on creativity and spirituality focused on writing and offered us seed money to get it going. Additional funding has come from the Clifford A. and Lillian C. Peeler Family Foundation.

The Women & Writing program includes:

- Weeklong writing retreats at the beach
- Workshops, classes, and monthly writing groups
- An annual essay contest
- Grants of up to \$1,000 for writing projects

Our writing retreats at the beach have been an enormous success. Twice a year we reserve a house at the beach and sponsor a week of silence and writing for a group of about nine women. These are not workshops but provide unstructured time for women to write in a supportive environment. Participants can talk with one another over meals and share their writing in the evenings. First priority is given to women who want to come for the whole time. The 2005 writing retreats will be held May 6–13 and September 30–October 7 at Pelican House, the retreat house on the beach at Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC. The cost of \$550 includes a private room and meals.

RCWMS offers workshops and classes on writing. Topics for these have included how to write more and better, memoir writing, writing from the heart, and writing over sixty. Watch our calendar for events. We also run three monthly groups for women who want to write and read to one another, who are trying to publish their work, or who want to talk about the business of writing.

Our annual essay contest offers prizes for essays about women's lives, feminist perspectives on spirituality and daily life, and women's experience of God. Prizes total \$1,000 and the winning essay is published in *South of the Garden*. Joyce Hollyday's winning essay from last year's contest is published elsewhere in this issue of the newsletter. Guidelines for the 2005 essay contest will be available in the late summer.

We offer a few grants up to \$1,000 to women writers each year. Interested applicants should send a letter to RCWMS describing themselves and explaining their writing project, and should include a writing sample of no more than two pages.



Chances...

inner-city Washington, D.C. With my decision to move to the mountains of North Carolina, I was losing my community, my work, my marriage, and my home. For weeks, the dream haunted my days as I tried to figure out its message for me.

Then one day I remembered Gloria. I had met her in a police wagon one brisk September night. She had been arrested on the street and charged with sexual solicitation. I, along with fifty other people, had carried loaves of bread under a banner that read "Bread Not Bombs" and blocked a driveway at a hotel that was hosting a nuclear weapons exhibition. We were charged with "incommoding"—a source of great amusement to Gloria and her friends.

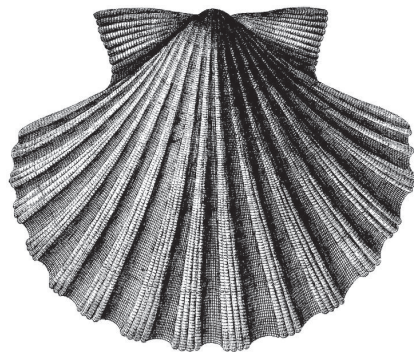
We were put in large holding cells in the basement of the D.C. courthouse. Shouting through the bars and across the corridor, Gloria told me through the night about the many mistakes she had made in her life. "But God always gives us second chances," she said, smiling. On that note, we decided to try to get some sleep. I stretched out on the cold, concrete floor, gripping a contact lens in each fist.

Around dawn a few of the women in our cell began to sing. Gloria shouted over to us, "Hey, do you all know 'Amazing Grace'?" Soon strains of the hymn thundered through the corridor as the two sides of the cellblock tried to out-sing each other. Searching for water for my contact lenses, I groped blindly toward the chrome contraption that served as drinking fountain, sink, and toilet. I pushed what I thought was the tap for the sink. The deafening roar of the jail toilet immediately silenced the singing. Laughing and pointing at me, Gloria hollered, "Now, that's incommoding!" Then she started up "Amazing Grace" again.

A guard appeared and shouted angrily over the uproar, "What's going on?" Gloria pressed her face against the bars, looked him squarely in the eyes, and declared, "It's only the gospel." Indeed it was. That night Gloria taught me that God always gives us second chances—and third and fourth. She understood the power of forgiveness and the truth of God's amazing grace.

And that, I came to understand, was the message of my dream. No matter how often we fall or fail, God continues to love and sustain us—and beckons us to give out to the world a measure of the compassion and mercy that God has lavished upon us. In the dream, I was entrusted with ever more valuable treasures. And the greatest treasure of all was the precious gift of life. In a time of brokenness, facing a vast uncertainty, I was having my life handed back to me. To receive it in all its richness, I had to put behind me all that was familiar and secure and step toward new mysteries of transformation and grace.

(Continued next column.)



Chances...

I didn't speak of the dream publicly until more than two years later, as part of a sermon. After the service, a woman I had not met before approached me. "I have been given an interpretation of your dream," she said. Her eyes beamed amid deep rows of soft wrinkles at her temples and forehead, which were framed with long salt-and-pepper hair. She gently took my hands in hers. "The seed is a masculine image," she said. "The bowl is a symbol of the feminine. Now you are ready to bring together these two aspects of your journey and move into a new life. Many new insights and gifts are in store for you."

I treasured the unexpected words from this winsome stranger. She was right about my journey. I had spent much of my energy in D.C. trying to compete by the rules in a largely male-dominated world—honing gifts of analysis and articulation. When I moved to North Carolina, I worked for a time as a court advocate for survivors of domestic violence and wrote a book about biblical and contemporary women. I relied on a circle of strong women to be my midwives into a life that more fully embraced female reality, including the suffering of my sisters—and my own. A quieter life, more rooted in prayer and self-examination.

The words of the stranger felt like an invitation to return to public ministry, but with the reminder that I must always be true to my deepest self. Soon after, I accepted a request to teach a week-long course on social witness in San Francisco. I began my first talk by sharing the dream, reminding the participants that whatever we do in the world must be solidly rooted in our reliance on God's grace.

One of the planners of the event embraced me after the talk, thanking me for connecting vulnerability, prayer, and social justice. At the end of the week, as we all gathered at the door of the chapel for a service of commissioning, she took me by the hand and led me wordlessly away from the others to a corner bathed in candlelight. "It's here," she whispered, her eyes wide with awe. Before us was a large bowl filled with anointing water for our commissioning. It was a piece of exquisite pottery, made of deep shades of blue and burgundy with veins of turquoise and accents of gold. As she placed my hands into the clear, warm water, I had the feeling that my healing was complete. Amazing grace indeed.

*Joyce Hollyday is an Associate Conference Minister for the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ and a co-pastor of Circle of Mercy, an ecumenical congregation in Asheville. She is the author of several books, including *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us*, and is currently at work on one about the Truth and Reconciliation processes in South Africa and Greensboro, NC.*



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