

South of the Garden

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

Volume 27, Number 2

July, 2006

Birdseed

by Jeanette Stokes

One Saturday morning in mid-May, I was sitting in my backyard listening to the chatter of birds in the pecan tree overhead and the squeak of a swing in the park next to my house. I was tired and thrilled to be still. It was the last weekend of Art and the Feminine Divine and I had not spent enough time being quiet all year. The breeze was gorgeous. A storm earlier that week had cleared the air and lowered the temperature. It was a perfect May morning.

I sat on a black wrought-iron chair that I had bought, along with its twin and a side table, from a friend when she moved to a downtown loft a year or two ago. I took the chairs home and plopped them down under the only tree in my backyard, where they have remained. I've had a variety of pieces of furniture in the backyard in the last 15 years: folding beach chairs, a hammock that was stolen, a lovely wooden garden bench that rotted, but nothing has been quite so satisfying as the wrought iron chair in which I was sitting. I used to hang out on the front porch where there are two great rockers, but this spring, because of the chairs and lovely new paths in my garden, I rediscovered the fine southern art of sitting in the yard. I knew it would not continue for long, as the mosquitoes were on their way. But for that moment, all I wanted was to be in my own backyard. Who knew that two chairs and some garden paths could make such a difference?

I was watching the little birdhouse-shaped birdfeeder that hangs in the garden. I had put it out of commission the year before after losing a struggle with squirrels, but having acquired a large bag of seed from my neighbor Danny who moved to Mexico, I decided to get the feeder out and try it again. The squirrels had not yet attacked it, the birds seemed to enjoy it, and I was happily watching the birds as they flew back and forth, ate the seed or perched on the tall wrought-iron crook that holds up the feeder.

I concocted a theory that the squirrels had left the feeder alone this year because Danny's bag of seeds was all seed. My seed the year before had included cranberries and peanuts, which was like hanging a blinking neon sign on the feeder saying, "Step right up. Get your red hot squirrel food here."

The problem with squirrels is not so much that they eat the seed, but that they are so heavy they tip the feeder to one side and all the seed falls out. I had made attempts in the past to outsmart squirrels, and had learned what experts will confirm: squirrels are smarter than humans. So, when the squirrels took to the feeder last year, instead of trying to prevent them from raiding it, I just took it down.

Spring came again and along with it Danny's big new bag of seed that made me want to try again. I fished the small wooden house-shaped feeder out of a dark corner in the garage, lifted its hinged roof, poured in the seed, and hung it back on the wrought-iron crook, which I had never bothered to move from its place in the garden. Before long there were birds perched on the tiny porches, happily pecking at the seed that falls down through the house and spills out into reach. It's

(Continued on back.)



AFD

Art and the Feminine Divine: An Exhibit

by Candice Ryals

Inspired by Mary Love May over two years ago, Art and the Feminine Divine has been about the journey as much as the event. Mary Love envisioned the exhibit as a way of "spreading Goddess seeds" in honor of her mother, Mary Shaw May, who is now 83 years old and living with Alzheimer's disease. Through a long, involved commitment, drawing together the time and gifts of many women in the Durham community, the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South joined Mary Love in her vision to create Art and the Feminine Divine (AFD). The AFD planning committee included: Miriam Biber, Sallye Coyle, Kathleen Hannan, Bryant Holsenbeck, Mary Love May, Anita McLeod, Courtney Reid-Eaton, Candice Ryals, Jeanette Stokes, Candace Thomas, Sue Versenyi, and Ann Woodward. The project was also greatly supported by Jennifer McGovern's tireless work at the Resource Center.

In the year leading up to the exhibit, the Resource Center sponsored a number of creativity workshops on the Feminine Divine as well as *A Celebration of Many Cultures: Outdoor Drumming, Dancing and Singing* coordinated by Kathleen Hannan. The spring exhibit explored and celebrated the feminine aspects of the sacred through the works of more than one hundred artists from across the state of North Carolina. Abstract and representational artwork, including pieces in fabric, glass, collage, painting, and sculpture, were brought to Durham to create the exhibit. Courtney Reid-Eaton installed the exhibit in five venues in central Durham. We are grateful to Tema Okun and Tom Stern, Transom Gallery, the Scrap Exchange and Francesca's for hosting the exhibit, and to the Self Help Credit Union for preparing and repairing our largest venue, 117 Market Street. We are also grateful for the many local venues that displayed gorgeous publicity posters designed by Joyce Hopkins.

The opening reception took place on Friday, April 21, in conjunction with Culture Crawl in downtown Durham. The five venues welcomed hundreds of Durham residents and visitors to enjoy the art, the friendly company, and the delicious food organized by Debra Brazzel and provided by Deb Nickel, George's Garage, Harris Teeter, Mad Hatter, Maple Spring Gardens, Saladelia, and Whole Foods Chapel Hill. With the help of over twenty volunteers, visitors were provided with information about the inspiration for Art and the Feminine Divine, maps and directions to the various venues, and descriptions of future events in the series. Brilliant purple sandwich boards created by Sallye Coyle dotted the downtown landscape and directed guests to the different venues. Glorious evening weather provided a perfect atmosphere for strolling between venues and gathering outside the Scrap Exchange to watch the Live Goddess performance and walk Bryant Holsenbeck's *Shoe Labyrinth!*

A series of musical events and other gatherings took place during the three weeks of the exhibit. With the help of volunteers, the private venues remained open several days a week for viewing. Concerts by Jewelsong, Lise Uyanik and the Mobile City Band, and STELLA

(Continued on back.)

Calendar

June & July, 2006

FUNDRAISING & PREVIEW PARTIES: Meinrad
Craighead Video Project

June 18, 7-9 pm, Meinrad's House, Albuquerque, NM

July 1, 5-7 pm, Ghost Ranch Santa Fe, Santa Fe, NM

July 6, 2006, 7-9 pm, Boulder, CO

RSVP or more information: ak@meinradproject.org,
www.meinradproject.org

July 13, 2006, 7:00-9:00 pm

ARTIST RECEPTION FOR CHARRON ANDREWS

Cup a Joe at Timberlyne, Chapel Hill, NC

Work by Charron Andrews on exhibit throughout July

For directions: Cup a Joe, 919-967-2002

July 20-23, 2006

EVANGELICAL AND ECUMENICAL WOMEN'S
CAUCUS CONFERENCE

Charlotte Hyatt at SouthPark, Charlotte, NC

Theme: Rooted in Love, Powered by God

Speakers: Mel Bringle, Nancy Sehested, Virginia

Mollenkott, Reta Finger, & more

Contact: www.eewc.com, nhardes@clemson.edu

August 13-17, 2006

2006 INTERNATIONAL UNITED METHODIST
CLERGYWOMEN'S CONSULTATION

Hyatt Regency McCormick Place, Chicago, IL

Cost: \$225-275 plus housing

Contact: www.gbhem.org/clergywomen/consultation2006/home.html

August 17-September 4, 2006

MOTHER MEERA IN THE USA

Los Angeles, Aug 17-20; Denver, Aug 22-23; Chicago,

Aug 25-26; Raleigh, NC, Aug 28-30; NY, NY Sept 1-4

Mother Meera, an emanation of Divine Feminine presence, will offer darshan, her personal transmission of light and energy.

Contact: www.mmdarshanamerica.com

September 2006, TBA

FUNDRAISING & PREVIEW PARTY: Meinrad
Craighead Video Project

Durham, NC

For more information: ak@meinradproject.org, www.meinradproject.org

September 11-22, 2006

PILGRIMAGE TO MALTA

Visit ancient temples built in honor of the Great Mother.

Leaders: Jennifer Berezan & Joan Marler

Cost: \$2795 plus airfare

Contact: www.edgeofwonder.com

September 22-29, 2006

A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING FOR WOMEN

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Unstructured week of quiet and writing at Pelican House.

Cost: \$600, includes room and meals

Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

September 25-28, 2006

SoLaTiDo: Southern Singer/Songwriter's Retreat and
Workshop

Wildacres, Little Switzerland, NC (near Asheville)

Guest instructor and performer: Pierce Pettis

Cost: \$225, includes room and meals

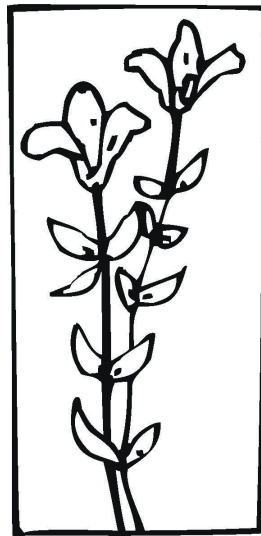
Contact: www.solatido-workshop.net

October 13-14, 2006

LOVE'S LONG UPRISING: Singing Weekend for Women
Montreat Conference Center, near Asheville, NC

Leader: Carolyn McDade, songwriter

Sponsor/Contact: Holy Ground, 828-236-0222,
www.holygroundretreats.org



October 13-16, 2006

WALKING TOGETHER: Being Different, Being One
Santa Fe, NM

Speaker: Lauren Artress, World Wide Labyrinth Project

Contact: www.walkingtogether.net

October 21-29, 2006

CONVERSATIONS IN PARIS, ON ART &
SPIRITUALITY: with Meinrad Craighead

Morning conversations with Meinrad and afternoon
museum trips with Lydia Ruyle.

Leaders: Meinrad Craighead and Lydia Ruyle

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

Contact: 970-227-7513, info@goddessconversations.com,
www.meinradcraighead.com

October 27-29, 2006

WOMEN OVER SIXTY

Durham, NC

Spend a weekend in a circle of women over 60. Speak of
your experience, learn from others, share challenges and
longings, and imagine the future of your elder years.

Leaders: Anita McLeod and Margie Hattori

Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

December 1-3, 2006

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE: A Silent Retreat for Women
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Come to the ocean for some quiet before the busy
holiday season sweeps you away. Will include gathered
silence as well as plenty of time to walk, rest, and read.

Leader: Jeanette Stokes

Cost: \$275 single, \$235 double, includes room and meals

Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

March 29-April 1, 2007

WOMEN OVER 60 RETREAT

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

We are not just an older version of ourselves, we are
moving towards wholeness. Journal writing, simple art
projects, silence, and sacred conversation will aid us as
we discern our own paths, become our own guides, and
face the unmapped territory of our elder years.

Leaders: Anita McLeod & Margie Hattori

Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

April 1-6, 2007

ECUMENICAL HOLY WEEK LABYRINTH WALK

Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, NC

Sponsors: Several Chapel Hill churches

Cost: Free and open to the public

Contact: GJordan@thechapelofthecross.org or
rcwmsnc@aol.com

April 29-May 6, 2007

A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING FOR WOMEN

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

June 8-10, 2007

WRITING WORKSHOP AT THE BEACH

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Leader: Elaine Neil Orr

Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

Sept 13-16, 2007

MEDITATION RETREAT WITH THERESE
FITZGERALD

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Leader: Therese Fitzgerald, teacher in the tradition of
Thich Nhat Hanh

Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

September 21-29, 2007

A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING FOR WOMEN

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

Her Name

Marya McNeish of Durham, NC was the second place winner in the 2005 RCWMS Essay Contest. Her winning essay is printed below. The Essay Contest is made possible by a grant from the Clifford A. and Lillian C. Peeler Family Foundation.

I Just Want to Say Her Name

by Marya McNeish

It began with silence, and beef jerky.

After stringing the seasoned strips of meat, two fourteen year-old girls sat on a log at camp. Talking, and not talking. Happy to just be. Noting with the giddiness of new and growing friendship that being able to not talk was cool.

We noted these things, Ann and I, intensely documenting and celebrating the friendship, occasionally alarmed at bumps in the road. Backs to each other, we worked doggedly all afternoon making silver bracelets in the craft shop. She was openly dismayed when we exchanged them, figuring her two strands soldered together were less masterful than the initials I'd carefully embedded in hers. I hemmed and hawed trying to convey how much her simple bracelet meant, that the bracelets were equal, because we were best friends, forever.

I still wear the bracelet she gave me. Hers sits in my jewelry box, tarnished and unworn. Her mother gave it back to me. I've never quite known what to do with it.

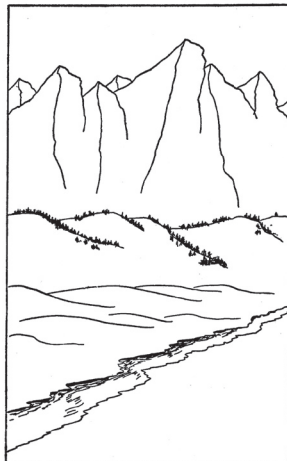
Or with these memories. Those times, strips of jerky slowly taking on flavor. Bracelets, pesky older brothers, compared notes on first boyfriends—we covered it all in weekly letters and frequent long-distance phone calls after we left camp for the year. Unabashed affection, and raw life, as she called five times in seven days when her father lost his agonizing struggle with cancer several months later. I counted the days until camp came round again, until we didn't have to say "20 million squeezes" over the phone, but could stand shoulder to shoulder at vespers, watching the sun slip away to make room for brilliant Colorado stars.

One moment she was levitating at my bunk, come to say goodbye at lights out, knowing I'd be gone to tackle Sabre Mountain before she woke and left for the backpack. She bounced around in her dad's red nightshirt, energized that she'd talked herself into going. We'd all clapped at sign-ups earlier that day, relieved and happy that she had a renewed spring in her step, despite the heaviness of her dad's recent death. The next day we peak-bagged the hell out of Sabre, no problem, even this first time for everyone, and I dedicated my climb to her, glad she was off climbing her own new mountain.

Instead, she fell. I wrote then that I was glad she was now with her father, as I scrambled and clawed for an elemental understanding, some shred of goodness from this horror. God, that lousy bastard, had taken her to be with her dad, as if it were preordained puppetry from some male force up there in the sky.

No one really knew what to do. It was 1978. We held tight to each other, and turned away from it almost immediately. I think it was fear, but of what—girls and women wailing in collective grief? One friend, who later said it felt like Ann had disappeared, termed it our code of silence. Yawing emptiness quickly papered over with new experience, including many more mountains, and the warp and woof of remaining connected as we moved through our separate lives.

Yet under the surface, sometimes buried for years, Ann's death simmered: one counselor still guilty that



she'd refused to bend the rules to allow Ann to call her boyfriend; another haunted by Ann requesting all her favorite songs just days before her death; and Ann's inner circle, still barely mentioning her name. We had these bits of sorrow clinging, rough-edged, to otherwise logical and meaningful lives.

Ten years ago an old counselor friend introduced me at a party by way of my friendship with Ann. Ricocheting my way toward the wine table, I wondered why it still hit me with such force. A young boy's death, and its proper acknowledgment, further opened a chasm of unfinished business. I begged my cousin, who'd lost her first child at eleven months, to give me a definitive answer. Do we ever really get over these losses?

I began to gingerly peel back the curtain, aware that shining light there would require saying her name, plunging through black holes of disconnect and unanswered questions. Ann, how could you just disappear? Over time I'd unfairly parked all my anger at the feet of one man. Why hadn't he insisted on a memorial? Why had he allowed the grief-stricken counselor to go back for Ann's body with no soulmate, only a camp administrator and the rangers, and the horse that would carry Ann back to the trailhead? Why had my counselor's report from that week stated that I'd had an "energetic" week, with no mention of the cataclysmic loss of my close friend?

Buddhist practice suggests the only way to the other side is through the belly of the beast. In David Guy's words, survivors "need to absorb the fact that the beloved is gone, not just in their minds but in their hearts and the marrow of their bones." I found old counselors and asked, and asked more. I pushed through the churning voices yelling "LEAVE THEM ALONE" and made sure all who'd been on the trip, and Ann's siblings, knew we were planning this service, this Labor Day, please join us, or pause in your own life and know we'll be lighting a candle for you as we honor Ann.

Twenty-seven years after her death we gathered, shoulder to shoulder, her brother Tom alongside us, piercing the cloud of grief, putting the ghosts to bed, our connective goodness holding us steady. I thought there might be six of us. Twenty-two gathered, including the camp director who'd been the unwitting and unknowing recipient of my fury, and the administrator who'd helped retrieve Ann's body. I'd learned earlier in the summer that his sister had died as a teenager. I met the eyes of both of those men before the service and felt my adhered anger unclip and float away. The two counselors from the trip clung to each other, spilling out tears of anguish and gratitude, and were followed straightaway by a former camper who lauded their grace and courage. Tom listened quietly, then said he'd always had his sister stuck at age fifteen, and now he didn't anymore. Toward the end I stood, hands jammed into my pockets, and choked out a song I'd written. The final stanzas point to the inescapable link between then and now, and suggest a way forward. The last line morphed from a desperate question to firm resolution just this year:

...Though all these seasons have gone round we're tied
to that dark mountain
Threads of that time weave through our lives, they're
never far away
We had our plans; your life a prayer now, dear Ann
Push past those stones, those clutching bones, we must
be on our way

Sweet teenage girls
We sang through the depths that year
You careened right out of our world
But we won't let you disappear.

(Continued on back.)

Birdseed...

an ingenious design, but the birds are not very good housekeepers. They seem to crack the seeds and leave the hulls on the porch, like fans shelling peanuts at a baseball game. Subsequent birds have to throw the hulls off the porch to get to good seed. I assume it is as irritating to a bird as finding a sink full of dirty dishes would be to me.

I've been too busy this spring. I have not written much, except newsletter articles when I had to, and I've made no art at all. I've had so much work to do, but even so, I know that there is no one to blame for the shape of my life but myself. There are twenty-four hours in every day and I am the person responsible for how I use them. Yes there are the demands of work, relationships, eating, and sleeping, but I am in charge of my decisions. If I take on too many commitments, projects that are too big, friends who are too demanding, if I set a standard for my garden or my housecleaning that is too high, if I answer the phone every time it rings or answer all the email when it arrives in my in-box, only I am to blame. I can't blame the weeds or the dust or the callers or even the large projects.

So, I am going to begin again at the beginning. I am going to write in my journal for twenty or thirty minutes early every morning instead of checking my email first thing. I am going to type three hundred words into the computer. I am going to make art, even bad art. I'm going to leave town for at least six weeks this summer. And I'm going to do a lot more of what I was doing that Saturday morning in mid-May: sit in my backyard watching the breeze dance through tall flowers while the birds throw empty hulls from their feeder.

AFD...

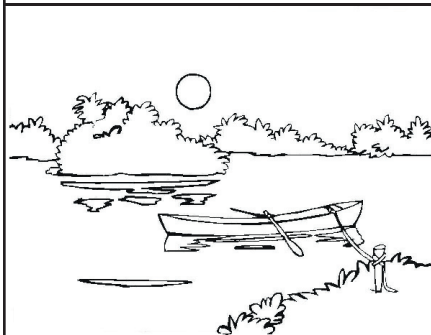
were hosted downtown by the Blayloc Café. Artist Jude Spacks gave a lecture presentation entitled *Moons and Mirrors: Sacred Fabric Art*, in which she discussed aspects of her technique and inspiration and shared slides of her work. The Okun-Stern loft hosted an afternoon event of storytelling from a variety of faiths. The series concluded with a Tara Meditation with Rachael Wooten, in which she offered a brief history of Tara, the female Buddha of Tibet, and led the group in an ancient Tara meditation.

It seemed only fitting that this exhibit, in honor of Mary Love May's mother Mary Shaw, should draw to a close on Mother's Day Sunday. We hope that the seeds planted will bloom in new and vibrant forms. We give thanks for all of the artists, volunteers, and visitors, who took part in this journey with us.

Candice Ryals is a graduate of Duke University and served as the RCWMS Intern during the last two months of Art & the Feminine Divine.

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Her Name...

That afternoon the five who were on the trip with Ann, together for the first time since the accident, huddled for several hours. They bravely worked their way through one counselor's journal, splicing together memories and crying long-buried tears, finding their way to the other side.

Closure? As I woke the next morning I held Ann in my thoughts and said, "we honor you." My dear friend Elizabeth, who traveled this journey with me, asserted that we honor her most by doing the work to remain connected. After she chose a memorial box for the service, Elizabeth said she wished there weren't a reason to get the box. I still miss Ann, too. I realized the other day, though, that I can now hear Elton John's "Your Song," a particular favorite of ours, without feeling like there's a stake going through my heart. It's more like a beginning. When we named this loss, we opened a portal that hadn't been visible to us in our isolation.

Her death was what it was. No puppet pulling strings for me anymore. God, that formless connectiveness that draws us toward kindness, wouldn't pick her out, wouldn't choose me to have this little lesson in courage. Bad things happen, and the connective bond encircles and lifts us up, frays, then regenerates, again and again.

I think I'll give Tom the bracelet.

Mine, I'll keep it on my arm, and be glad for the jerky.

Marya McNeish has put down deep roots in Durham, NC, where she lives with her friend Bob and their two adored blondes, Ivan and Lucinda. She's happily enmeshed, working for adults with severe mental illness at Threshold and singing a cappella with the six other women of Stella, who sang her off last September as she left to finish this story. Putting this saga in writing offered the chance to remember the sweet details that were an essential part of this difficult experience.

RCWMS

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