

# South of the Garden

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

Volume 28, Number 4

December, 2007

## Keep Going

by Jeanette Stokes

It's true—what I learned when I was in college.

I was about twenty when I attended my first Zen Buddhist sesshin (meditation retreat). I remember only a few things about the weekend retreat held in the Field House at Smith College. One is the crack in the floor, which I observed for hours on end. Another is that when it was over I said to myself, "I've done that now. Won't have to do that again." The most striking thing I remember, however, is an instruction given by the Japanese Roshi (teacher) who led the weekend. He said that when we listened to his teachings, we did not need to struggle to remember what he said. He promised that anything of real use to us would find its way inside of us and take root. He was right. The one thing I remember he said is that I didn't have to struggle to remember what he said.

In October this year, we had a small flood at my house. Our washing machine hose burst, which would have been messy enough had the washing machine been in the basement or on the first floor, but it is on the second floor. No one was home at the time, so the black rubber serpent spewed water for several hours. When Dwight came home just after 5:00 that Friday afternoon, he was greeted by a waterfall cascading from the second floor landing down into the hallway below and water raining through the ceiling of the study just off the hall.

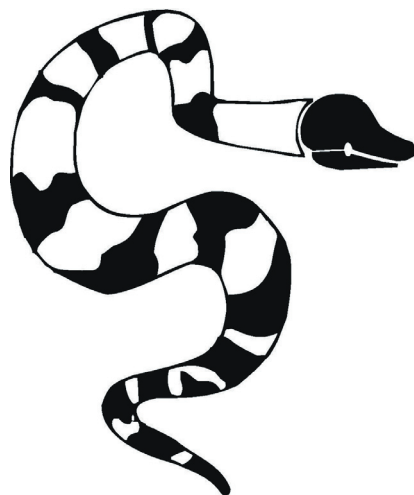
Before I got home that day from a quick trip to Winston-Salem, Dwight had turned off the water, dragged the study's soggy throw rug out onto the front porch and draped it over the banister, and sopped up all the visible water with towels and buckets.

As I write, the study has been cleared of furnishings, the ceilings have been torn out in the hallway and the study, and the wall between the hall and the study has been removed. I can enter the study through the doorway or simply slip between the studs. And yes, the insurance company will help pay for the unplanned renovations.

As you can imagine, there was a lot of wet paper in a room we called "the study." One soggy pile contained rejection letters from agents I tried before I found one who agreed to represent *Hurricane Season*, a book I have finished about recovering from divorce. (Fortunately, my computer was in the car. Dwight was not so lucky. His laptop was in the study and when he picked it up, water poured out of it. It's a goner.)

Since we had to move everything out of the study, boxes and piles of paper wound up in the dining room. In the evenings after the flood, I sorted piles. I allowed myself one basket of things I simply couldn't throw away, but the rest of it I recycled or filed. While sorting, I came across a stack of quarterly newsletters from the North Carolina Writers Network, which I had saved because one of them contained a Judy Goldman quote I wanted to keep. But which one? I spread three years of the newsprint circulars out in front of me on the floor and leafed through them. As I went, I found other useful articles to clip, a danger of taking too close a look at an old pile. None-the-less, I *found* the interview with Judy Goldman in a 2004 issue.

(Continued on back.)



## Snake

by Anita McLeod

Returning home from my women's group on a hot summer night this year, I drove into my driveway and noticed how dark the front of the house looked. The porch light was off and only the soft glow of a gaslight in the yard penetrated the darkness. I jumped out of my car and hurried up the short walkway through shrubbery and dense groundcover to the porch. "Ouch" I screamed, as I felt a sudden piercing pain in my right foot just below the anklebone. It felt like something bit me.

I ran up the steps to the porch, put the key in the lock, and opened the front door. As I walked inside, the pain increased. "I think I have been bitten by a snake," I said to the house and to my husband who was reading in a blue chair by the fireplace. By the time I reached the couch across the room from him, I could hardly put weight on my right leg. "Oweee, it really hurts," I howled as I lay down shoving two cushions under my throbbing lower leg.

"It couldn't be a snake, it must be a bee sting," he offered. "I have been stung by bees and wasps, and this is not a sting. It hurts a lot more," I insisted. I looked down at my foot and saw two closely spaced blood red spots just in front of my anklebone. I was sure I had been bitten by a snake. I knew immediately that I did not want to go to the Emergency Room, because I did not want crisis medical management. I did not feel I was in crisis. Quite the opposite, I felt a strange sense of calm and was sure I would be okay. Instead of being poisoned, perhaps I had been marked.

I did not have a bad reaction to the snake venom. My lower leg and ankle swelled and bruised, but there were no signs of severe inflammation requiring medical treatment. We applied some pressure to limit the spread of venom and I kept my foot propped up all night. A physician friend of ours who had worked with snakebites in Africa came by for a look and confirmed that I had definitely been bitten by a snake, a good-sized copperhead, and that my body was handling it well. He did not suggest any further treatment and saved our family beach vacation by recommending I wear a compression stocking so I could walk. While my leg healed in a week, I sensed that I would be exploring the symbolic meaning of being marked by a snake for years to come.

About twelve years ago, I found a beautiful whole snakeskin on the same front walkway. That particular day, I was coming home in the late afternoon from teaching one of my first classes on menopause. As I listened to the women speak of the mystery of their menopausal experiences, chills ran up and down my body and I knew it to be an extraordinary moment. When I found the snakeskin on my front walk, I took it to be a sign of a turning point. I carefully gathered it up and placed it in my medicine bag. I continued to lead menopause classes for another ten years, encouraging women to listen to their bodies, to trust and speak of their own experiences and to explore the mystery of this major life transition.

Being bitten by the snake may be a sign at another turning point in my life. My ninety-three year old

(Continued on back.)

# Calendar

RCWMS sponsored events are marked with \*.

December 7, 2007, 9:30 am–2:00 pm

## PEACE HILL DAY

The Stone House, Mebane, NC

A day of mindfulness and reflection sponsored by The Peace Hill Community

Free

Contact: Melinda Wiggins, mwiggins@duke.edu

\*December 16, 2007, 7:00 pm

## INTERFAITH CELEBRATION of COMMUNITY, SPIRIT, and CHANGE

Beth El Synagogue, 1004 Watts St., Durham, NC

All are welcome. Bring a candle and, if it's easy, a folding chair or cushion to sit on.

Sponsors: RCWMS and stone circles

Cost: \$5, suggested donation

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

December 29–31, 2007

## NEW YEAR'S INTERPLAY UNTENSIVE: At the Beach Trinity Center, Atlantic Beach, NC

We'll tell stories, dance, sing, and rest as we reflect on the old year and anticipate the new.

Leaders: Ginny Going and Tom Henderson

Cost: \$400, double occupancy (single room additional)

To register: Send \$100 non-refundable deposit to

Colleagues, 400 S. Boylan Avenue, Raleigh, NC 27603

January 2, 2008, 11:30 am

## NC COUNCIL OF CHURCHES LUNCHEON

The Irregardless Café, Raleigh, NC

A gathering to remember Sr. Evelyn Mattern and to recognize recipients of funding from the Sr. Evelyn Mattern Fund.

Contact: www.nccouncilofchurches.org

\*January 4–11, 2008

## A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING FOR WOMEN

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

RCWMS has reserved Pelican House, the retreat house on the beach at Trinity Center, for an unstructured week of writing for women. Please come for the whole week.

Cost: \$635, includes room and meals

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

\*February 9, 2008, 9:30 am–4:30 pm

## WOMEN OVER 60

Durham, NC

Leaders: Anita McLeod and Margie Hattori

Spend a day in a circle of women over 60 as we create a new vision of ourselves as elder women. We'll share challenges and longings and harvest valuable life lessons.

Leaders: Anita McLeod and Margie Hattori

Cost: \$85

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

February 27, 2008

## WOMEN'S LABYRINTH WALK & POTLUCK

Groce UMC, Asheville, NC

This Holy Ground event includes labyrinth walks at 4:30 & 7:00 pm with a potluck in between at 6:00 pm.

Leader: Jeanette Stokes

Cost: \$15

Contact: Holy Ground, 828-236-0222,

www.holygroundretreats.org

March 4–5, 2008

## INTERFAITH FEMINISMS: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives

The Phyllis Tribble Lecture Series

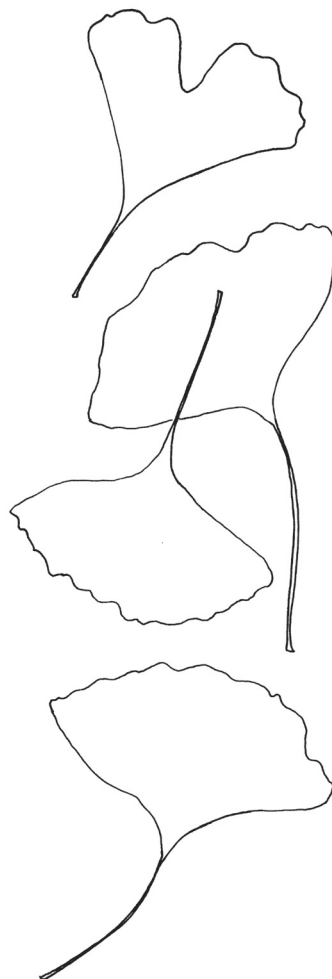
Divinity School, Wake Forest Univ., Winston-Salem, NC

Speakers: Mary C. Boys, Susannah Heschel, Yvonne

Haddad, Hibba Abugideiri

Contact: www.wfu.edu/divinity/tribble-lectures.html

336-758-3522



\*March 15, 2008

## THE GIFT OF MENOPAUSE

Durham, NC

Explore the changes and the gifts of this sometimes confusing life transition.

Leader: Anita McLeod, BSN, RN, health educator interested in conscious aging

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

March 28–30 2008

## HERSTORY 2008

Massanetta Springs Conference Center, Harrisonburg, VA

Theme: Women Who Testify—Proclaiming the Gospel in Our Own Voice

A feminist perspective on the testimonies of biblical and historical women can offer hope and vision.

Keynote speaker: Anna Carter Florence, Columbia

Theological Seminary

Contact: Sally, sallyorob@ntelos.net 540-377-9296, or

Jean, jrodenbough@bellsouth.net, 336-282-4222

\*April 17–20, 2008

## WISE CHOICES: A Retreat for Women Over 50

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

We'll explore how to respond to our soul's calling in midlife and through our elder years. We'll create our own vision of growing older.

Leaders: Anita McLeod & Margie Hattori

Cost: \$500 for single and \$475 for double (includes room and food)

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

\*April 28–May 3, 2008

## BARCELONA AND MONTSERRAT WITH MEINRAD CRAIGHEAD

The Meinrad Craighead Documentary Project invites

you to join RCWMS and artist Meinrad Craighead for a week in Spain.

Contact: Amy Kellum, ak@meinradproject.org

\*May 2–9, 2008

## A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING FOR WOMEN

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

RCWMS has reserved Pelican House, the retreat house on the beach at Trinity Center, for an unstructured week of writing for women. Please come for the whole week.

Cost: \$660, includes room and meals

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

\*June 13–15, 2008

## A WEEKEND RETREAT AT THE BEACH

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

During this retreat, we will focus on the history and legends of the Black Madonna and explore her connections to Kali of India and Tara the female Buddha of Tibet. There will be plenty of time to meditate or relax by the water's edge.

Leader: Rachael Wooten

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

\*September 26–October 3, 2008

## A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING FOR WOMEN

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

RCWMS has reserved Pelican House, the retreat house on the beach at Trinity Center, for an unstructured week of writing for women. Please come for the whole week.

Cost: \$660, includes room and meals

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

\*October 16–19, 2008

## WISE CHOICES: A Retreat for Women Over 50

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

This retreat for women over 50 will focus on writing.

Leaders: Anita McLeod & Margie Hattori

Cost: \$450 for single and \$425 for double (includes room and food)

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



# Archives

*This fall, the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South celebrated its 30th anniversary. Fifteen years ago, we placed our organizational records at the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University. On September 6, 2007, supporters gathered in the Rare Book Room at Perkins Library to commemorate these milestones in our history. Our papers are available at the Bingham Center for use in research.*

*Laura Micham welcomed everyone with remarks printed below. Jeanette Stokes gave a brief history of RCWMS; Anita McLeod read from Sue Versényi's newly published collection of poems, *Enough Room*; Debra Brazzel offered reflections on the *Meinrad Craighhead Documentary Project*; and Rachael Wooten commented on the interfaith work of RCWMS.*

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Good afternoon. I am Laura Micham, the director of the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture. I want to welcome you to the library for this wonderful occasion. The Bingham Center is thrilled to host a celebration of the Resource Center for many reasons: because of our long and fruitful working relationship, because of the compatibility and intersection of our organizational missions, because we appreciate your mentorship and ongoing support of our work, and because we wanted to take this opportunity to tell you, its founder, trustees, friends and supporters, what it has meant to us to preserve and provide access to records that document your critical work. In order to convey this I will try to give a sense of the history of our relationship, of how the collection has been used, and of some of our memorable collaborations.

While the collection came to Duke fifteen years ago, the first contact between the Resource Center and the Bingham Center was in 1989 between Jeanette and Ginny Daley, the first women's history archivist at Duke. Ginny wrote the letter we archivists write when we've just discovered a person or organization that really excites and inspires us. It was full of gratitude for Jeanette's work and detailed explanations of the importance of the materials for generations of researchers. Jeanette responded by means of a post card. She said, "I am delighted to know that Duke has a women's studies archivist. As a graduate of the divinity school it pleases me no end. I would be delighted to talk with you about the Resource Center papers. I'm in Durham so it will be easy." She gave a phone number and signed off. Classic, straightforward, get-to-the-heart-of-the-matter Jeanette. By 1991 Jeanette and Ginny had worked out all of the details and signed the agreement, and Jeanette brought the first batch of materials over in early 1992.

In the intervening fifteen years the collection has been used by scores of researchers for countless projects. This is no surprise given the scope of the Center's work. Few organizations have made so many meaningful contributions to so many causes and issues. Here are just a few that are listed in the inventory of the collection: the Equal Rights Amendment, sexism, feminism, economic justice and poverty, gays and lesbians in the Church, Central America, child abuse, abortion and the abortion controversy, racism, rural ministry, gender and language, spirituality, housing and homelessness, health and medical care, and women in the workplace. And that's just for starters!

So it won't surprise you that the collection has supported classes, research papers, theses and dissertations, activist projects, exhibits and public programs on just about all of these topics. One of my favorite examples is a "History of Christian Sexual Ethics" class that was a wonderfully eye-opening experience for the students.



Another is a letter written by an undergraduate student to a very prominent secular feminist leader. This leader wasn't entirely convinced of the power and importance of feminisms of faith. This student used the Resource Center papers to compose an impassioned argument, which, with encouragement from Jeanette, she found the courage to send.

The student found out about the collection because she was part of a session Jeanette organized on feminisms of faith for the Bingham Center's 2005 symposium on generational feminisms. This session, one of six that day, included several women, from a rabbi to a Zen Buddhist priest. It was everything you'd imagine from Jeanette. And, in addition to inspiring the letter-writing student, it was Sallie Bingham's favorite part of the whole three-day event! This is just one of many ways that Jeanette and the Resource Center have enriched the work of the Bingham Center. Jeanette has also done everything from moderating a session at our symposium on abortion to facilitating the acquisition of many important collections. We have benefited over and over again from being in her orbit.

And Jeanette has been a wonderful teacher to me. Growing up Northern and Catholic and educated in a secular feminist tradition I had a lot to learn about the amazing, courageous, transgressive, transformative work of feminists in the Protestant Church. I am deeply grateful for this education.

To paraphrase a line in a review of "25 Years in the Garden," Jeanette's book of essays published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Resource Center: An ordained Presbyterian minister, Jeanette Stokes has been taking risks for over twenty-five years. Her power as a writer comes from her intellectual strength as a theologian; her sturdy and unquenchable faith; her integrity; and her awareness that life is splashes of color, sometimes joyous, sometimes heart-breaking.

Jeanette, thank you for helping us to see these colors more clearly; for taking the time to truly understand and appreciate the people around you; for always setting the right tone; for your boundless compassion, generosity, wisdom, courage and humor, and, of course, for your get-to-the-heart-of-the-matter, say-exactly-what-must-be-said sensibility. Thank you.

*Laura Micham is a feminist archivist and the director of the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University. For more information about the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, visit their website: [library.duke.edu/specialcollections/bingham/](http://library.duke.edu/specialcollections/bingham/)*

## RCWMS

The RCWMS Board greatly appreciates contributions of time, energy, and money to RCWMS. We are especially grateful for support from the *Clifford A. and Lillian C. Peeler Family Foundation*, the *Kalliopeia Foundation*, and the *Mary Duke Biddle Foundation*. To make a financial contribution or to volunteer to help with office tasks, mailings, or program planning, contact the RCWMS office or see us on the web at [www.rcwms.org](http://www.rcwms.org).

2007 RCWMS Board of Trustees: Debra Brazzel, Courtney Reid-Eaton, Amy Kellum, Sarah Walls, Marya McNeish, Betty Wolfe, Danyelle O'Hara, Rachael Wooten

Jeanette Stokes, Executive Director  
Jennifer McGovern, Administrative Director

# Going...

Here's the quote.

*Perseverance is what it's all about. It's not really about talent. There are a lot of people with a lot of talent, but not a lot of people with perseverance. It's all about staying with it, no matter which part of the process you're engaged in, whether it's the writing of the book—so many people begin a novel and don't finish it.... Then when you get to the publishing process, it's so easy to give up.... It's all about perseverance and staying with it.*

As a child I discovered that if I stuck with a club or a camp long enough, eventually they would let me be in charge. As a young adult, I learned that the people who get Ph.D.s are the ones who don't give up. Later on, writers assured me that writing is really slow work and not to become discouraged. Judy Goldman assured me of that. Don't give up. Keep going.

It took from 1995 to 2002 to finish and publish *25 Years in the Garden*, a book of my essays from *South of the Garden*, and that was after most of the essays had already been written. With *Hurricane Season*, it took five years to get over the separation and divorce enough to even look at my journals, and then four years to write the book, cut a hundred pages, get other people to read it, and rewrite it several times.

When writing, I frequently hear a voice in my head saying, "This is junk. Why are you still working on this?" I reply, "Maybe so, but this is what I am doing and I am going to keep going." I try to finish a project and then let people I respect help me decide if it is worth publishing. I'm telling you this in case you write and think your writing is garbage. Read it out loud. Get into a writing group. Share it with someone else. How will anyone ever know what your life is like if you don't tell them? If you need help with the prose, there are people around who are more than willing to assist you.

And as for whether you are writing the right thing or not, it's not really up to you or to me. Just keep going. And pray. You might use Thomas Merton's prayer, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going...and the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You."

Finally, it is not the goal, but the journey that is important. It is not the finished piece, but the writing of the piece that changes me. Writing a book, looking for a lost quote, and repairing a house are all part of the journey. If we seek our own deep wisdom, trust a community of friends, and rely on the presence of the Holy One, then we may discover again and again that the journey is home.

It's like the Roshi was saying: don't struggle. Just listen and you will hear and remember whatever is really important. Life does not have to be such a struggle. Just keep going. There is no road ahead. We make the road as we go.

# Snake...

mother-in-law died the week before the bite. She was a strong southern woman who had lived independently for most of her life with fierceness, grace, and a deep faith that served her well. She died a peaceful death surrounded by three generations of family who loved and respected her. She showed me it is possible to die to this world, to leave all that you love, to let go and move on in peace. She had been a teacher for me in life and now in death she gave a powerful teaching to me and to all her family. At her memorial service many of my dearest women friends showed up. Most had not met my mother-in-law, but were there because they loved me. Twenty-five years ago when my parents died and two years ago when my brother died, few of my friends could attend their services because they took place out of state. I now know what I missed.

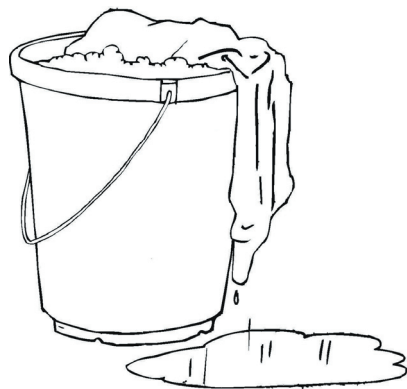
At my mother-in-law's funeral a friend said to me, "Now you are the matriarch of the family, you are the female elder." I understand the snakebite as an initiation to my elder years, and a calling to gather older women together in circles to explore elderhood and conscious aging.

I want to sit in sacred circles with women who are excavating the meaning of their lives and are willing to explore the terrain of getting older. I want women to wake up and define for themselves what holds power and value for them in the years beyond fifty. I want women to recognize the sacred moments that are happening in their everyday lives. I dream of groups of older women mentoring and supporting younger women as they learn to honor the wisdom of their bodies and choose to follow the sacred threads of their life experience. I long for the companionship of wise elders and that is why I offer workshops and retreats.

Join me in a circle of women. In April and October 2008, Margie Hattori and I will lead *Wise Choices*, a four-day retreat for women over 50 at Pelican House at the beach near Morehead City. After a recent retreat, one participant commented, "Going to *Wise Choices* was a profoundly rejuvenating and healing experience for me. The leaders brought the women together into a safe and sacred space—just the perfect environment in which to explore our lives, dreams, struggles, and choices." (See the Calendar for more information.) A daylong workshop for *Women Over 60* is scheduled in Durham on February 9, 2008. I'll lead *The Gift of Menopause* in Durham on March 15, 2008.

I've long known that I experience the presence of the Holy when I am in nature and with people I care about. I now understand aging as a spiritual journey that can be nourished and deepened sitting in a circle of women. The snake helped remind me that life is precious and finite and it is time for me to pay close attention to how and where I spend my life energy.

*Anita McLeod, BSN, RN, is a health educator who is interested in conscious aging. She is the past chair of the board of RCWMS. She enjoys camping alone, making art with fabric, and playing with her five grandchildren.*



SUBSCRIPTIONS to *South of the Garden* cost \$20 and run for 12 months from the time placed. Foreign or First Class is \$25. A subscription is free of charge to anyone for whom the subscription fee is a burden. Tax-deductible contributions over and above the subscription fee are appreciated. Make checks to RCWMS and send to: 1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC 27701.

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