

South of the Garden

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

Volume 31, Number 2

June 2010

NCCC 75th

by Jeanette Stokes

The NC Council of Churches was founded in 1935 by H. Shelton Smith, a theology professor at Duke Divinity School. I heard about this crusader for ecumenism and racial justice when I was in seminary at Duke. Smith was long retired by then, but a Duke friend, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, was researching his career.

Seventy-five years later, this May, friends and supporters of the Council gathered at Duke Divinity School to celebrate the work, witness, and people of the council. I appreciated Dr. Richard Smith's recollections of his father. He told one moving story about a dreadful event in Durham. When Richard was about eleven, a white bus driver shot a black man in the back and killed him. H. Shelton Smith took his son with him to the trial. When the not guilty verdict was returned, Richard recalls that the judge put his head down on the bench. Afterwards the father took his son back to the judge's chambers and asked, "Why did you put your head down when the verdict was announced?" According to Richard, the judge replied he was considering declaring a mistrial for this gross miscarriage of justice.

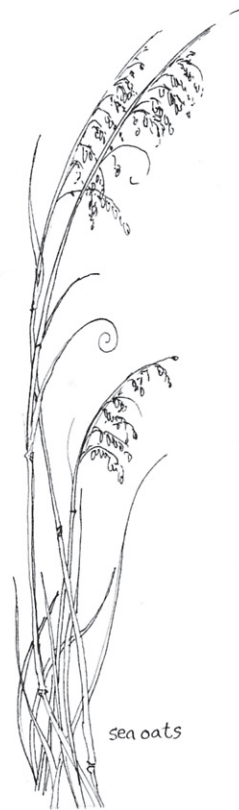
Other speakers noted the council's work on gender equity, migrant farmworkers, NC's tobacco economy, the death penalty, and GLBT issues. The beloved name of Sr. Evelyn Mattern was invoked again and again. Evelyn served two stints as a social justice officer for the council and staffed the Equal Rights (E.R.) Committee.

I enjoyed Bett Hargrave's account of the NC Council of Churches' E.R. Committee, which would not stop meeting after the ERA was defeated in 1982. I was fortunate to serve on the committee as it carried on for another 20 years. The group's last effort, led by Sr. Evelyn, was a theater piece on women in the religious community in NC, *The Women's Coffeehouse of Spirit*.

My favorite part was seeing friends, especially Jean Rodenbough, current President of the Council; Brigit Johnson, former Council President; former staff, Collins Kilburn and Jimmy Creech; and the elder feminists: Julia Elsie, B. Holt and Tibbie Roberts. Julia (only in her eighties) has worked long years on behalf of migrant workers. B. Holt (nearly ninety-four) served as a state legislator from Alamance County for many years, and Tibbie is still active at the tender age of ninety-six.

During the evening worship, I sat on a row with Tibbie, Julia, Bett, and B. We listened to Jean Rodenbough's words of welcome and were inspired by the clear vision of Hope Morgan Ward, Bishop of the Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church. Hope reminded us that the Ecumenical movement started with a conference in Edinburgh in 1910. She noted that the NC Council of Churches was almost the only integrated assembly in NC in the 1950s. She reminded us that God is in every place where the dignity of life is threatened, where injustice holds sway. She inspired us to stay in the world, to continue the good work, to keep the faith.

Listening to the bishop, I remembered Helen Crotwell, former Associate Minister at Duke and the first woman to run for Bishop in the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church. Helen didn't win that election, but she paved the way for other women.



Sue Sneddon

Feminist Nest

by Jenny Graves

I've been reading Clarissa Pinkola Estes' feminist classic, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*. It's all about finding your soul's home and living out of your true "wild woman" nature despite the cultural forces that constrain you until you fit a patriarchal culture's "ideal woman" mode.

I relate most to Estes' account of the Ugly Duckling. In her iteration of the fairy tale, a swan's egg has rolled down a hill and landed in a duck's nest. When the poor swan duckling hatches, everyone is confused. "Who is this strange looking thing?" the duck family wonders. The baby knows she doesn't belong in this family, and so off she goes to find her community, wherever they may be. By the end of the story she has grown into a beautiful swan, and she is reunited with her swan family.

At some point during divinity school, I realized my spiritual egg must have rolled into the wrong nest. Luckily for me, RCWMS found me co-coordinating the divinity school women's center. My spiritual home, as it turned out, was just up the street, up Watts Street, to be exact. As a young adult woman of faith I have found a "girl's clubhouse" full of brilliant, empowered, creative women. Their understanding of the Divine is expansive and inclusive. Their practices of making art, writing, and caring for the earth keep me invigorated and inspired, as I go about living an ordinary life that can sometimes feel constricting.

After I finished my M.Div., I entered a period of unemployment and underemployment. I was delighted when Jeanette invited me to spend my spare time as the RCWMS intern. This internship turned out to be a gift of grace that transformed the job search (which could have become depressing after fourteen months) into a time of spiritual growth, feminist community, and resume building. As I read *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, I know I am blessed to have women mentors and friends encouraging me to be my wild and creative self. They remind me that wild creative women are also made in the image of God.

I want to be a part of this community of women who "weave spirituality and creativity into a vision of justice for the world" for the rest of my life. Now that I have a job, I am willing to give a dollar a day to keep RCWMS alive. A dollar per day is not much when I think about how much I am willing to spend to take care of myself (buying good food, good coffee, the occasional retreat or massage.) I'm counting RCWMS in my self-care budget, and I am inviting you to join me. If a dollar a day is too much for you, I want to recommend 8 dollars per month. That's 96 dollars a year for only about 26 cents a day. If everyone in the RCWMS network gave that much, programs at RCWMS would not only be sustained, they would expand enormously.

You can make a contribution or monthly pledge online at www.rcwms.org. If you give the old fashioned way, like I do, make your check out to RCWMS and send it to RCWMS, 1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC 27701.

Jenny Graves is a writer living in Durham, NC. She works as an organizer for Clean Energy Durham, an organization that trains neighbors to help neighbors save energy.

Calendar

* = RCWMS events. See more at: www.rcwms.org.

June 8-10, 2010

SPIRIT & PRIDE: Re-Imagining Disability in Jewish and Christian Communities

Leaven Center, Lyons, MI

Spirit and pride are powerful forces in the disability rights movement and in the lives of people with disabilities, calling forth a radical wholeness and a passion for justice. Includes poetry, music, videos, case studies, and stories to re-imagine disability in liberating ways, and allows time for personal reflection, writing, text study, and small group conversations.

Leaders: Rabbi Julia Watts Belser, scholar, activist, and anti-oppression educator; Melanie Morrison of Allies for Change, pastor and anti-oppression educator

Cost: \$190, includes room and meals. Scholarships.

Contact: melaniemorrison@alliesforchange.org, 989-855-2277, www.leaven.org

*June 11-13, 2010

A WEEKEND OF REST & EASE: The Feldenkrais Method

Pelican House, Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Come to the annual RCWMS beach weekend and learn new practices for rest and ease. Betty Wolfe will lead 3 or 4 Awareness Through Movement® lessons interspersed with long stretches of time for appreciating the beach and enjoying the ocean. Themes will include Happy Feet, Sounder Sleep, Releasing Holding Patterns, Freeing Neck and Shoulders, and 3-Minute Computer Cure.

What better place and season to learn in the Feldenkrais way: sensing, feeling, imagining, thinking, moving and most importantly, "the learning occurs in the rest."

Leader: Betty Wolfe, M. Div., Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner®

Cost: \$280

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

June 12, 2010, Saturday, 3:00-9:00 pm

CREATE OUR OWN TIME CAGE DOLLS

Margaret's house, near Hillsborough, NC

This workshop is an opportunity to make our own dolls, to enjoy a potluck supper, and to get creatively juiced up in the community of women. Dolls will be made of materials such as tree branches, clay, bones, nests, shells and more. Bring food to share and goodies for adornment.

Leader: Cher Shaffer, www.outsider-folk-art.org/outsider/education/cher_shaffer.asp

Cost: \$30-\$75

Contact: margarethh@embarqmail.com, 919-644-1850

June 17-18, 2010

HIGHLANDS WOMEN'S DIALOGUE

Highlands, NC

This discussion will focus on domestic violence, related issues, and ways of assisting victims.

Leader: Elizabeth Bounds, professor of Feminist Christian Ethics, Emory University

Cost: \$120

Contact: Jean Hammond, jeanlovham@aol.com

June 19-20 & June 26-27, 2010, 7:00 pm

THE GODDESS SUITE

Durham / Chapel Hill / Pittsboro, NC

An evening of celebrating women, including a performance of *The Goddess Suite*, a wonderful choral work by singer-songwriter Cynthia Rylander Crossen.

Saturday, June 19, Forest Theater, Chapel Hill

Sunday, June 20, Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham

Saturday, June 26, Northwood H.S Auditorium, Pittsboro

Sunday, June 27, Forest Theater, Chapel Hill

Cost: \$7 suggested donation

Contact: Cynthia Crossen, crossen@mindspring.com, 919-967-2500, 919-542-3827



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June 26, 2010, Saturday, 9:30 am-3:00 pm

MOTHER GOD & THE DAUGHTERS OF SARAH:

Reflections on Women's Movement & Feminist Theology
Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, NC

Come for a day with Reta Finger, who edited the Christian feminist magazine *Daughters of Sarah*, from 1979-1994. We'll use issues and stories to focus on the women's movement and where we go from here.

Leader: Reta Halteman Finger, New Testament Scholar

Cost: \$15

Contact: Jan Clark, jeclark47@gmail.com

June 27-30, 2010

THE YOUNG CLERGY WOMEN PROJECT

Candler School of Theology, Emory Univ., Decatur, GA

Participants will explore current leadership models as well as their own gifts and strengths. Attendees will consider how to live out their unique leadership styles in a creative and balanced way. The Young Clergy Women Project is an ecumenical, international organization that connects female clergy under 40.

Contact: www.youngclergywomen.org

July 12-17, 2010

LIGHT TO LIVE IN: The Biblical Call to Peace Rooted in Justice

Keuka College, Keuka Park, NY

A conference for peacemakers sponsored by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

Contact: www.bpfna.org/conference

*August 21, 2010, Saturday, 9:30 am-4:00 pm

AWAKEN THE FEARLESS WRITER WITHIN

Durham, NC

Explore your writing in a supportive group of women using Centered Writing Practice™, a method developed by Peggy Millin. Emerging and accomplished writers will write to prompts, read, listen to others, and respond to what has been read.

Leader: Peggy Tabor Millin, founder of ClarityWorks in Asheville, guides women in the writing process through classes and retreats. She is the author of *Women, Writing, and Soul-Making: Creativity and the Sacred Feminine* (2009) and *Family Matters: The Power of the Personal Story* (2010). See www.clarityworksonline.com.

Cost: \$80

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

*September 25, 2010, Saturday, 9:00 am-noon & 1-4:00 pm

THE BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH PANGS: Exploring Pregnancy and Motherhood as Embodied Spiritual Experiences

Durham, NC

Come for one or both sessions. Explore the body's wisdom and its spiritual capacity in these two experiences that touch us all, whether we are mothers or not.

Morning session, "The Sacred Poetics of Pregnancy: Exploring Relationship and Interdependence"

Afternoon session, "The Mystical Metaphors of Motherhood: Exploring Ambiguity and Adventure"

Leader: Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, author and theologian in residence at Univ. Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill

Cost: \$50 for one session (half day), \$75 for all day

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

*October 10-17, 2010

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: about \$690, includes room and meals

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

*January 2-9, 2011

WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING FOR WOMEN

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Pilgrimage

by Marion F. Thullbery

The archway curved above my head, ancient and serene. Some months before, I ignored reasonable notions at a time when my resources said to stay home, stay safe and save money, and chose instead to make a pilgrimage. Now, standing at the entrance to Glendalough, a 6th century monastic community in Southern Ireland founded by St. Kevin, I began the first day of the actual pilgrimage experience.

Wikipedia says a Pilgrimage, in the context of religion or spirituality, is a long journey in search of great moral significance. The Catholic Dictionary defines pilgrimage as a journey made to some place with the purpose of venerating it, or to ask for supernatural aid, or to discharge some religious obligation. A monster-sized Random House dictionary states that a pilgrimage is a journey, especially a long one, made to some sacred place as an act of religious devotion.

None of these meanings occurred to me standing under that archway. I wasn't looking for moral significance. I didn't want to venerate or devote anyone or anything. My main focus of faith lately involved intense prayer that the plane stay up in the air as we travelled over all that water. Suffering from a deep soul-wound in the wake of exclusion from a church that had been my second home; suffering from the loss of that community of faith that nurtured my spirit and held the energy of years of vocation, I responded to a tug of spirit to accompany some 20 women, many of them strangers to me, on this community pilgrimage to Ireland.

Our guide, a man of medium height, slender with a long face covered by black beard and mustache, repeatedly invited us to make metaphorical meaning of the sites we encountered.

For instance, at this moment he noted that "This threshold marks the shift into a new place, and the cross carved just inside is a cross that speaks of refuge. You might consider at this point, where you need refuge and what new openings might bring new light and healing to your life."

I wasn't buying. It would take more than a metaphor of refuge and opening to touch the muted, wounded person living inside of me. Two hours later our guide led us back out of that arched gateway and down a road.

"We are actually leaving Glendalough proper. The government sold off a part of the land connecting the monastery to this next place, historically outside of the main of the monastic community anyway." We walked along a road and then turned to walk through a long meadow to a building we learned to identify as a church, with characteristic rough stone walls, floors of pebbles and no roofs, the thatched material gone centuries ago.

"This is called Women's Church," the guide explained. In the early days of Celtic Christianity, women's ways were central in the spiritual life of the communities. Then men usurped the religious leadership. Women gathered in this church for their own worship and other needs. "

Bits of my interior flickered dots of feeling, but I couldn't identify or sort through them. I couldn't connect the little dots of explosion as the guide continued.

"Notice this entrance into Women's Church." I saw an arched passageway carved out of thick smooth stone. "The threshold is about three feet deep. Notice the carvings on the walls of the threshold. They invite you to recognize transition, to notice movement into different space, considering what you leave behind you and what



Sue Sneddon

you need as you enter this space." My spirit embraced the liminal experience of the deep threshold even as the rest of my interior hearkened to those flickers of feeling.

Our guide's voice continued but I caught only phrases "...two rooms, probably the later one added so women wouldn't be in the actual sanctuary...Mary's Church...Theotokas...feminine spirit..."

Much louder words reverberated, "Outside the monastic community...sold off the land connecting...outside, sold off, excluded." I felt tears of anger and loss welling up inside of me. Everything blurred. As the group of women looked around, I stood, dazed, stunned, tears dripping down.

The guide's voice again, "And around back you will see rough stones standing up in the ground representing the graves of infants who died before baptism. Not allowed to be buried in the hallowed ground of the monastery cemetery, the women brought them and buried them here." I walked away.

The next day, more touring landed us on a small beach hugging a clear cold lake. Across the lake rose a rock face a hundred yards or more. Our guide pointed to a crag in the rock face, known as Kevin's bed. Once the community Kevin established began to thrive, he left that dwelling and lived in the way of a hermit up in this crag over the lake. Eleven of our number chose to stay on the small pebbly beach to consume picnic lunches, the other group having left to explore local stores for shopping and a more elegant lunch.

After a time, one woman entered the water after divesting her body of clothes. The rest of us gawked. The mid-sixties weather even with sunshine meant the lake water felt fairly frigid to my Southern skin. But then, one after another felt drawn to immerse themselves. Finally, laying aside logic and coaxing my reticent body, I removed all my clothing, walked hip-deep into the crystal clear water then dived in the rest of the way. Breathing suddenly wasn't something that the body did without thinking.

But something about that crystal cold water and the women in it made me glad of heart for the first time in a long time. We took turns dunking ourselves and making three-fold Celtic bindings. I bound myself to the energy of the land, to the spirit of women, and to the water holding our bodies. Already places of meaning and restoration, these images of land, feminine spirit and immersion into water-signifying-life have served as touchstones for my healing and grounding ever since.

Later that day, as others drifted back to our living quarters, I felt invited. I don't know how to say it any better than that. I felt invited. I retraced our steps of that previous morning and walked past the arched gate way into Glendalough, past old gravestones, along the road and down the long meadow back to Women's Church. I stood gazing at that deep carved threshold, waiting. A characteristic question came to me. "Ought I to prepare to enter this space?" Some other energy dispelled this. Let go of needing everything to make sense. You have brought yourself here. It is enough.

No flash of vision nor external voice, this invitation and energy was a knowing. Moving through the threshold, I stood in the midst of the large main room. When the whole of our group had been gathered in that room, it had seemed full. But that was nothing to the experience of fullness around me now. I breathed in the spirit of women, ancient energy inhabiting that place, touching and nurturing my spirit.

As if bidden, I moved to one of the walls and put my hands on the stones. I began moving them, from stone to stone to stone. With each movement, each touch, a release of some held pain, a balm to some open wound. At the level of heart and emotion, of cellular memory,

Programs

WRITING

After the third or fourth woman I know in the Asheville area told me she was writing with Peggy Millin, I thought, "I've got to meet this woman," and was so pleased when she turned up at the RCWMS Labyrinth Walk in Asheville in March. That gave me a chance to learn more about the Centered Writing Practice™ groups and retreats she leads. She left me with a copy of her book, *Women, Writing, and Soul-Making: Creativity and the Sacred Feminine* (2009), which I read when I got home. The process she described sounded just right for the women who have been in our writing programs over the last seven years, so I invited Peggy to come down the mountain in August and lead a weekend workshop.

AWAKEN THE FEARLESS WRITER WITHIN will take place in Durham on Saturday, August 21, 2010, from 9:30 am to 4:00 pm. Peggy Tabor Millin runs ClarityWorks in Asheville and guides women in a writing process that helps them know themselves more deeply and express themselves more clearly. In our workshop, beginning and accomplished writers will be inspired to write, read, and respond to one another in a supportive environment. See the Calendar for details or visit the RCWMS website.

BIRTHING & MOTHERING AS METAPHORS

Marcia Mount Shoop is the theologian in residence at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill. That means she is a Presbyterian clergywoman with a Ph.D. in Theology from Emory University, who shares her expertise with local churches and in public programs. Think of her as an itinerate feminist theologian who is making more room for men and women to explore their faith in the modern world. One of Marcia's main interests is in developing a theology of the body, and her new book on that subject, *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ*, will be published in the fall.

RCWMS has invited Marcia to lead two programs on Saturday, September 25, 2010. "THE BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH PANGS: Exploring Pregnancy and Motherhood as Embodied Spiritual Experiences" will be a day-long program in two parts. Women are invited to attend the morning session, the afternoon session, or both. The morning session will focus on "The Sacred Poetics of Pregnancy: Exploring Relationship and Interdependence." The afternoon session will be "The Mystical Metaphors of Motherhood: Exploring Ambiguity and Adventure." Come for one or both sessions. Explore the body's wisdom and its spiritual capacity in these two experiences that touch us all, whether we are biological mothers or not. See the Calendar for details or visit the RCWMS website.



Sue Sneddon

Pilgrimage...

of my exhausted soul, powerful healing energy touched into me again and again. As I moved around the inner walls of women's church, I could almost feel a brush of presence here, notice whispering there. No psychotic break, this was most solid and rich of soul and care. I had not left reality, but entered reality in a way I seldom experienced.

After awhile I walked around to the area on the far side of the church where stones marked those infant graves. "No land could be more hallowed or suitable as a resting place," I told them. "You are included forever."

Tears had fallen throughout this time. But they were not the hot angry tears of my first encounter. Nor were they the despairing tears of unmet needs. Like the tears of the Phoenix, they contained a potent ability for healing, baptismal tears that melted my wall of isolation and shifted my basis of inclusion forever.

Marion Thulbery, of Durham, NC, is an Episcopal priest and a supervising chaplain at the V.A. Hospital in Durham. This essay won second place in the 2009 RCWMS Essay Contest.

RCWMS

The Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South is a 32-year-old nonprofit dedicated to weaving feminism and spirituality into a vision of justice for the world. In the past, RCWMS sponsored workshops, conferences, and retreats on women and religion, equal rights, economic justice, healthcare, and violence against women and children. The organization has mentored and encouraged young women, religious leaders, writers, and activists. In recent years we have developed programs about art, writing, creativity, and spirituality.

The RCWMS Board appreciates contributions of time, energy, money, and stock to the Resource Center. Your support allows us to continue offering our resources and programs. We are grateful for support from the Clifford A. and Lillian C. Peeler Family Foundation, the Kalliopeia Foundation, the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation, and the E. Rhodes and Lona B. Carpenter Foundation. To make a financial contribution or to volunteer, contact RCWMS or see us on the web at www.rcwms.org.

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