

South of the Garden

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

Volume 32, Number 2

June 2011

At Long Last

by Jeanette Stokes

I was ordained to the Presbyterian ministry twenty-nine years ago. At the time, I was living in Greensboro with my partner Katherine and working two jobs, as a campus minister at UNC Greensboro and as the Director of the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South. My presbytery didn't exactly know that I was a lesbian. They didn't ask and I didn't say.

That was 1982. I had been out of seminary for five years, and it took me all that time to jump through the Presbyterian hoops to be ordained—as a woman, never mind about the rest of it. I went on being a campus minister for a few more years and then switched to just one job, the one with RCWMS, which I still have. I also went on having a female partner until 1990, when I took up with men again.

On the 10th day of May, 2011, as I waited for the last necessary presbytery to approve a PCUSA amendment that would remove the barriers to the ordination of openly GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered) people in our communion, my mind wandered through the stories of friends. Some of my gay and lesbian colleagues kept their mouths shut about their relationships, about their families. Some gave up their ordinations, choosing to be clear, well-integrated, and open about their lives. Some left the denomination altogether and found homes in places like the United Church of Christ, which had given up crucifying and prosecuting people based on their sexual orientation.

For those who chose to keep going, remaining ordained members of a denomination that was uncomfortable with their presence, things got stickier. By 1997 and the passage of the "fidelity and chastity" amendment to the Book of Order, GLBT ministers and elders were formally out of compliance. Said amendment required fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness of Presbyterian clergy and elders. Since GLBT people couldn't be legally married at that point, it left them outside the door, except for those who chose celibacy.

It is that amendment that was being "undone" on May 10, and for that I wanted to shout, "Alleluia!" What we should want of people in leadership is for them to be open, honest, and faithful. We want to teach young people mutual respect and to not take advantage of those who are younger, smaller, or in any way weaker. Sexuality can and should be an expression of love, not of power. Sexual orientation should not be the issue; the quality and equality of relationships should be.

We are a rugged lot, we Presbyterians. We often stay and fight it out. (Perhaps you've heard of the Hatfields and the McCoys. They were our folks.) I've been so proud of GLBT Presbyterians and their allies who didn't give up. We've stayed in the church vowing to change the rules. The debates have become more respectful over the last three decades. The number of people on our side of the issue has continued to increase, and I had almost come to believe I would live to see the day come. But then, just moments before the last needed presbytery began its meeting, I had butterflies in my stomach.

(Continued on back.)



Summer

by Jeanette Stokes

Summer is upon us. The garden is full of flowers and the farmers' market is full of fruits and vegetables. I love the bounty all around us. I turn sixty at the end of May, and it feels like a great time to be alive.

RCWMS has several very interesting offerings in the coming weeks, several in Durham and one at the beach.

RCWMS "Women Writing the South" scholar Melanie Morrison will be here on June 7, 2011, for a program at seven in the evening. She is doing fascinating research on a crime in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1930s. Having just watched the remarkable PBS program, *Freedom Riders*, I'm reminded of what a terrifying place Alabama was for African American people earlier in the twentieth century. In the process of working on this project, Melanie has developed a method of doing RADICAL GENEALOGY that may provide the rest of us with ways of thinking about our family histories that can illuminate how our lives intersect with the broader history of this country. Join us for a fascinating evening.

Our summer retreat, which will take place June 10-12, 2011, at Trinity Center on the NC coast, will focus on Tara meditation practice and will be led by Rachael Wooten, a former RCWMS Board member. Rachael is a practicing Jungian analyst in Raleigh who has seventeen years of experience with the practices and teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, especially those focused on Tara, the female Buddha of Tibet. Rachael is in the process of writing a book about the twenty-one Taras, the various faces or manifestations of this Buddha. In May, she spent ten days in Switzerland on retreat with her Tibetan teacher, furthering her Tara research and practice.

Our friend Lynne Hinton will be in North Carolina in June for readings from her new novel, *Pie Town*. Lynne Hinton is a United Church of Christ minister and author of fourteen books. She has served churches in North Carolina and in New Mexico and is a delight to be with. See the Calendar for dates and places.

RCWMS is pleased to announce the publication of *Sea Level*, a novel by Nancy Kilgore. A story of two women and a small town on the coast of Virginia in the 1980s, *Sea Level* follows a new minister in her first call and an artist who is searching for the feminine divine. Both women have to reach deep into their own spiritual resources to find their way. You may order the book at www.rcwms.org.

A writer and psychotherapist in Hanover, New Hampshire, Nancy Kilgore has participated in several RCWMS writing weeks at Trinity Center. She will be reading from *Sea Level* at Regulator Bookshop, Durham, NC at 7:00 pm on June 23, 2011. She will also lead a workshop, WRITING WITH MINDFULNESS, Saturday, June 25, 10:00 am–1:00 pm in Durham, NC. Workshop participants will use meditation and writing enhance their creativity. Guided meditations will lead participants into writing stories, poems, novels, or creative nonfiction.

Please see the Calendar for more details. We hope you can join us for one or more of these events.

Calendar

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

*June 7, 2011, Tuesday, 7:00 pm

RADICAL GENEALOGY

Durham, NC

Join us for an evening with RCWMS Women Writing the South scholar Melanie Morrison. Drawing on her Southern roots and her social and racial justice work, Melanie is exploring the untold stories of activists in the 1930s in Birmingham, AL. Her project centers on the abduction of three young, white, Birmingham women in 1931 and the wrongful arrest and conviction of an African American man, Willie Peterson. Melanie is retrieving stories of Birmingham activists, both black and white, who resisted the politics of division and built coalitions across race, class, and gender. She will present some of her findings and invite us to explore how each of us might utilize the tools of radical genealogy in our own ancestral research.

Leader: Melanie S. Morrison, Ph.D., M.Div., is founder and director of Allies for Change in Michigan.

Cost: Donations welcome.

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

*June 10–12, 2011

DEEPENING TARA PRACTICE: Spiritual Practice in the Natural World

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Experience the benefits of meditation practice centered on Green Tara, the beloved female buddha of Tibet. Walk in ancient maritime forests, gaze at open sky, immerse yourself in the ocean, and dive into Tibetan Buddhist teachings. Explore qualities of awakened consciousness such as wisdom, loving kindness, generosity, patience, and peacefulness. The natural world mirrors all these qualities, as well as the teachings on the interconnectedness of all life and compassion for self and others. As the beauty of nature infuses our practice with joy, our capacity to bring joy to the world increases. Through meditation, discussion, and time in nature, we'll open ourselves to the joy of our inner Tara nature!

Leader: Rachael Wooten, PhD., Jungian analyst, has been practicing and teaching Tibetan Buddhist meditation with the Twenty-one Taras for 17 years.

Cost: \$400, includes lodging and meals. \$100 deposit.

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

June 10–15, 2011

READINGS of *Pie Town* by Lynne Hinton

June 10, 7 pm, Barnes & Noble, Arboretum, Charlotte

June 11, 7 pm, Barnes & Noble, Friendly, Greensboro

June 14, 7 pm, Regulator, Durham

June 15, 7:30 pm, Quail Ridge Books, Raleigh

Lynne Hinton is a United Church of Christ minister and author of fourteen books. www.lynnehinton.com

*June 23, 2011, Thursday, 7:00 pm

READING from *Sea Level* by Nancy Kilgore

Regulator Bookshop, Durham, NC

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

*June 25, 2011, Saturday, 10:00 am–1:00 pm

WRITING WITH MINDFULNESS

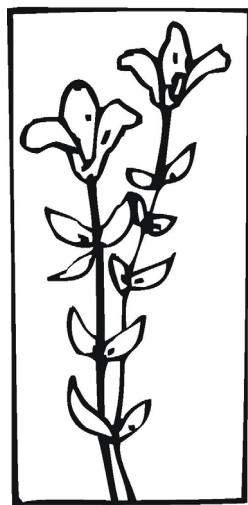
Durham, NC

Open to a deeper creativity by combining meditation and writing. Mindfulness helps to find ways to become comfortable with parts of ourselves we avoid. Creative writing allows expression of the insights gained. Guided meditations will lead us into writing stories, poems, novels, or creative nonfiction.

Leader: Nancy Kilgore is a writer and psychotherapist in Hanover, NH. Her first novel, *Sea Level*, is about a small town on the southern seacoast and its new woman minister.

Cost: \$50

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



July 4–9, 2011

SO YOU MUST FORGIVE: Conference for Peacemakers Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, VA
Join us for a challenging and nurturing week exploring the Biblical commandment to forgive.

Sponsor: Peace Fellowship of North America

Contact: LeDayne McLeese Polaski, ledayne@bpfna.org

August 8–11, 2011

THE YOUNG CLERGY WOMEN PROJECT
CONFERENCE 2011

Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC

Rest and renewal, refreshment and re-connecting with God—our souls are made for times like these. This conference is made for these things too. The Conference, presented in conjunction with Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School, is an opportunity for summer Sabbath. Join other clergy women (under 40 years old) from various denominations for worship and play, prayer and reflection as we explore our spiritual health.

Leader: Rev. Winnie Varghese, Episcopal Church's clergy wellness program

Cost: \$160 for program & meals. Register by June 30.

Contact: Christi O. Brown, cobrown@div.duke.edu,

<http://youngclergywomen.typepad.com/conference/>

*August 27, 2011, Saturday, 9:30 am–4:00 pm

AWAKEN THE FEARLESS WRITER WITHIN

Durham, NC (a lovely location with a cat)

Explore your writing in a supportive group of women using Peggy Millin's Centered Writing Practice™.

Whether a beginning or experienced writer, you will leave with a reliable tool for a writing practice that will inspire your writing and enrich your life. Your body's yearning for respite and soul's desire for speaking your truth will find nurturance and communion as you explore this particularly feminine approach to the writing process within a circle of women. Participants will write to prompts, read, listen and respond to others.

Leader: Peggy Tabor Millin is founder of ClarityWorks in Asheville. See www.clarityworksonline.com.

Cost: \$80

To register, print Registration Form and mail it in.

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

September 8–11, 2011

AWAKEN TO YOUR DREAMS

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Dreams are personal guidance from the soul, the True Self, the Divine sent every night to give direction and meaning to our lives. Learning to explore the meaning of dreams will help you tap into this guidance. Assistance in remembering dreams can be provided in advance. Prior dream work is not required.

Leader: Nancy Powell, Certified Dream Work Facilitator

Cost: \$350, includes lodging and meals. \$100 deposit.

Contact: Nancy Powell, nancy.powell1@frontier.com, 919-484-8289

September 9–11, 2011

SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY: Beauty from Ashes—Our Goal is Peace

Kirkridge, Bangor, PA

Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women and female allies gather to form a mutually supportive community that continues via a list-serve. More: www.kirkridge.org.
Leaders: Mary Hunt and Virginia Mollenkott

Cost \$345

Contact: Kirkridge, 610-588-1793, www.kirkridge.org

*September 25–October 2, 2011

WEEK OF QUIET & WRITING FOR WOMEN

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

An unstructured week of writing for women with quiet days and conversation in the evenings.

Cost: \$700, includes lodging and meals. (\$100 deposit.)

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

Genealogy

Genealogy as Spiritual Practice

by Melanie S. Morrison, © 2011

It is part of our task as revolutionary people, people who want deep-rooted, radical change, to be as whole as it is possible for us to be. This can only be done if we face the reality of what oppression really means in our lives, not as abstract systems subject to analysis, but as an avalanche of traumas leaving a wake of devastation in the lives of real people who nevertheless remain human, unquenchable, complex and full of possibility.

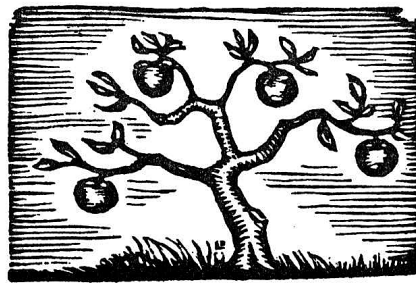
—Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*

Each day that I log on to Ancestry.com, I run the risk of being swallowed whole. With each new person or generation added, multiple green leaves appear on the branches, fluttering seductively, inviting me to attach this birth certificate, or that death notice, or this list of passengers aboard a ship from England. There is no end to the threads that can be followed and the original question that sent me searching can easily be lost as I fall down another rabbit hole lined with historical minutia. While on sabbatical three years ago, I often stayed up most of the night, clicking on each new glittering leaf like a gambler promising herself for the seventeenth time that this will be the last roll of the dice.

I choose to take these addictive and distracting risks because there is something more than glittering leaves that compels me to log on each day. It is the search for roots; the search to know from whence I come; the search to understand more deeply who my people are. That search is embedded in another life-long quest born of legacy and personal commitment; namely, to understand what it means to be white in these United States of America and the consequent responsibilities for repairing the breaches that white supremacy has created. My family's genealogy is inevitably a racial genealogy because this nation, from the moment Europeans invaded its shores, has been inextricably bound up with the construction and reconstruction of racial identities intended to privilege some and exploit or annihilate others.

I am driven to understand my racial, cultural, and ethnic roots not simply as an interesting historical exercise. I am compelled to do this because I have witnessed so often how those of us who are white either deny that we are "raced" by proudly asserting that we are "simply human or American" or we bemoan the fact that we do not have a "culture" and seek to fill this void by mimicking the cultural identities and practices of others. I am compelled to understand more precisely and deeply my people's histories because people of color have said to me in different times and ways, "I appreciate that you want to understand my experience, Melanie, that you want to understand what it means to be a person of color in this country, in this community. But what I most need from you is that you begin to understand your own experience. I need for you to do the hard and strenuous work of understanding what it means to be white in America. Unless you do that work, you are dangerous."

I do not want to study my ancestors in an historical vacuum, but to understand who they are and the choices they faced by studying the economic, political, and social forces at work in the communities and regions in which they lived. Every community—from the tiniest villages to the largest metropolitan areas—contains histories of oppression and resistance. Every community, as well as every family tree, contains stories that need to be mined, shared, and archived of people who resisted racism by organizing, harboring fugitives, speaking up and speaking out, writing editorials, engaging in sit-down strikes, loving, befriending, and marrying across race lines, writing poetry, preaching sermons, and singing songs of protest and pride. Every community, as well as every family tree, also contains stories of people who



colluded with systems that promised privilege, exploited others, failed to speak out, betrayed family members in the quest for wealth, turned their backs on the plight of neighbors, or actively engaged in violence.

We need to recover these ancestors, not as one-dimensional villains or saints, but as complex and contradictory women and men who—like us—lived lives replete with acts of heroism and with deeds that made them complicit in systems of evil. Who they are and what we inherited from them by way of debts or assets will inform the work each of us is called to do here and now as we seek to confront and dismantle the contemporary manifestations of white supremacy and racism. Some of our ancestors may be people whose spirits we can call upon in times of trial, demoralization, or despair. Other ancestors may inspire our work because we seek to embody a retributive justice that repays in some measure what those ancestors stole from their contemporaries.

In *Medicine Stories*, Aurora Levins Morales describes radical genealogy as the practice of rooting ourselves in the "real, concrete histories of our people." It is a keeping of accounts, says Morales, and its intent is "to pierce the immense, mind-deadening denial that permeates daily life in the United States."

Something as commonplace as a photograph, a letter, or the fragment of a family story can serve as the key to unlock the first door into the practice of radical genealogy. If you have the will and the stomach for it, that door will surely lead to another and the next and the next and the next. In my case it was a seemingly innocent question of how my grandfather came to be named Truman Aldrich Morrison. I wondered who Truman Aldrich might have been, in part because these are the patrilineal first and middle names that my father, brother, and nephew also bear.

Opening that door led me to discover a great-great uncle previously unknown to me or my siblings: Truman H. Aldrich married Anna Monroe Morrison in 1870 in Newark, NJ and soon after came south with his brothers-in-law, one of whom was my great grandfather, John Morrison. As a carpet bagger who had the resources to acquire massive amounts of land in the wake of the Civil War and the collapse of plantation life, Truman Aldrich became one of the largest coal magnates in the history of Alabama and was one of the industrial founders of Birmingham.

As I researched the history of Truman Aldrich's mining practices I learned about the convict lease system that re-enslaved tens of thousands of black men during Reconstruction in the south. Using laws enacted with the purpose of intimidating newly freed black people, law enforcement officials throughout Alabama arrested black men and then the courts charged inflated bail that could not be paid by the defendants. In place of serving time in jail or prison, these men were sold as free labor to the owners of mines, railroads, lumber camps, and farms. One quarter of the black men who were sent to the mines died in those mines. The survivors were often brutalized in what amounted to another form of slavery.

I had heard of the convict lease system before discovering that Truman Aldrich was related to me, but I had never studied it extensively. Knowing that my great-great uncle had both utilized the system and benefitted from it, I checked out and read every book I could find on the system.

When I attend anti-racism trainings and we are asked to name someone who has inspired our passion for racial justice, I name my father: Truman Aldrich Morrison, Jr.

(Continued on back.)

At Long Last...

On another exciting day long ago, the day I graduated from seminary, I turned to friends and said, "They'll be sorry." As I watched older people rankle at the idea of GLBT clergy, I said, "They'll age out." In May, on the brink of my 60th birthday and what felt like the authorization of my ordination, I just wanted to say, "Thank you."

I am so grateful to the scores of people who have stayed with this church family (the PCUSA) long enough to see this issue a little further down the road. That's a mighty fine example of fidelity in my book.

When we heretics finally get our way, I guess we don't get to be heretics anymore. We get to take up the rank and file of regular, imperfect, sinful people of the church. We also get to remember that we are what there is, we are the stuff God has to work with. We are who there is to do God's work in the world. And there is much more work to do.

To all those who have kept the faith, "Thank you." You have made me proud to be a Presbyterian.

Sixty

The following message from Courtney Reid-Eaton, bears repeating as we celebrate Jeanette's sixtieth birthday

In 1977, Jeanette Stokes graduated from seminary, stepped out into the world, and looked around. A natural community organizer, pathfinder, and creative being, she noticed there were few resources for women entering professional ministry, so she created one: The Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South. She was just 26 years old.

Today, RCWMS is close to marking its 34th year of "weaving feminism and spirituality into a vision of justice for the world." We have built a strong community, offered hundreds of programs, and supported countless women in realizing their spiritual, creative, intellectual, activist selves.

On May 26, Jeanette will celebrate her 60th birthday. Many of us have been encouraged by her wisdom and enriched by her many gifts. When she founded RCWMS she began her life's work; and it is good.

The Board of Trustees of RCWMS invites you to join us in celebrating Jeanette at 60 by making a special gift to support her continuing work through RCWMS. To make a contribution, mail a check to RCWMS or visit www.rcwms.org.



Genealogy...

For it is he who planted in me the conviction that I, as a white person, can and must be of consequence in the struggle for racial justice in this country. Through my genealogical practice, I have come to understand more deeply that I have also inherited class and race privileges that have spelled deprivation and degradation for others. Having opened the doors that led me to uncover the convict lease system and so much more, I cannot say his name or mine without also bringing that legacy into the room.

Genealogy becomes a form of spiritual practice as I acknowledge the complex and often contradictory inheritance from my ancestors, and as I remember that what I do and fail to do will impact those who come after me. Recognizing "the debts and the assets" of what I have inherited emboldens me to bring a heightened sense of self-scrutiny, accountability, humility, and compassion to my own life and activism, asking: What have I done with what has been given me? What will I leave for those yet to come?

Melanie S. Morrison, Ph.D., M.Div., is founder and director of Allies for Change, a national network of anti-oppression educators based in Michigan. She is currently the RCWMS Women Writing the South scholar.

RCWMS

The Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South is a thirty-three-year-old nonprofit dedicated to weaving feminism and spirituality into a vision of justice for the world. RCWMS sponsors workshops, conferences, and retreats on women, religion, creativity, spirituality, and social justice. The organization mentors and encourages young women, religious leaders, writers, and activists.

RCWMS appreciates contributions of time, energy, money, and stock. To make a financial contribution or to volunteer, contact RCWMS or visit www.rcwms.org. We are grateful for support from the Triangle Community Foundation, The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, the Foundation for the Carolinas, The Dallas Foundation, and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

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www.rcwms.org rcwmsnc@aol.com 919.683.1236

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The Resource Center for Women
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1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC 27701
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