

South of the Garden

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

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News

THANK YOU!

Many thanks to all of you who contributed to the RCWMS 35th Anniversary Challenge campaign. Thanks to you, we raised over \$60,000 in gifts and pledges, making this our most successful fundraising to date. We are grateful for your generous support of RCWMS.

WINNERS

We are pleased to announce the winners of the 2013 RCWMS Essay Contest. First place goes to Julia Sendor of Chapel Hill, NC, for her essay, "Thick Places: Annalee's Kitchen," which appears on page three. After working with traditional weavers in Nicaragua, and as a community organizer and newspaper reporter in West Virginia, Julia now works on a farm in Hillsborough, NC. Her essay draws on her time in West Virginia. Second place goes to Martha Simmons of Rockwell, NC, and third place goes to Anna LaSala-Goettler, of New Haven, CT.

This year's essays focused on home as the theme and were judged by Meghan Florian, Erin Lane, and Marcy Litle. Many thanks to the judges and the many hours they put in reading and deciding. Congratulations to all those who entered the contest. They were wonderful. Keep writing and consider entering next year. Details will be available in the fall.

OUTSPOKEN PHILOSOPHER

Speaking of writing, RCWMS trustee Meghan Florian wrote an article on her personal blog, www.femmonite.com, in response to NC Governor Pat McCrory's recent attacks on public liberal arts education, specifically philosophy, gender studies, and women's studies programs. The piece, "Notes from an Employed Philosopher," received over 9,500 hits, and was quoted by the *New York Times* philosophy blog, *The Stone*, where it was included in the site's weekly link round-up. The piece has now been picked up by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, with publication forthcoming.

Meghan has an undergraduate degree in Philosophy, a masters of theological studies, and is currently a candidate for an MFA in creative writing. In response to the governor's suggestion that state universities should focus on educating people for jobs, Meghan highlighted the many and varied successful career paths her colleagues have pursued with their philosophy degrees.

MULTIFAITH MINISTRY

We are pleased to announce the publication of a new booklet, *Ground, Connect, Stretch, Serve: Multi-Faith Ministry on College and University Campuses*, by Rev. Wakoh Shannon Hickey, PhD. Published jointly by RCWMS and the Women's Interfaith Institute of the Finger Lakes, the booklet offers practical ideas for promoting religious literacy and spiritual development on college and university campuses. It proposes a four-part program that includes contemplative practices, community-building, formal and informal education, and community service. You may order copies from RCWMS (\$5.00 each, includes tax & shipping).



Heart

by Jeanette Stokes

Everything seemed fine as I ate my lunch and chatted with a friend by phone, but by the time I finished eating, my heart was beating wildly. It was November 5th, the day before the election. Though my heart rate worried me, I kept going. I took a bath, got dressed, went to the office, and asked my officemates to take my pulse. It was so fast, none of us could count it. That's when Mary Russell said, "You will be calling your doctor now or going to Urgent Care, right?" I managed to get an appointment for later that afternoon and kept working.

I went to the family medicine clinic around 4:00 pm with my heart still racing. A nurse clocked it at 150 beat per minute. I was so nervous I had to pee every ten minutes. What if there was something really wrong?

The nurse practitioner who looked after me ordered blood work and an EKG. The results so alarmed her that she later said she almost sent me to the emergency room, but the doctor she checked with was convinced my situation could be managed at home. As the nurse was writing me a prescription for a drug to calm my heart, it slowed on its own. Thank goodness! The nurse then said, "If we can't get you an appointment with a cardiologist tomorrow, I want to see you back in here!"

I'm afraid of a lot of things and was unnerved by my heart beating wildly for over three hours. Even though it had stopped its erratic behavior and they were sending me home, I just had to hope I wouldn't die in my sleep.

That marked the end of the election season for me. I pulled the plug on my involvement and had to trust that others would pick up the slack. Instead of working the polls, feeding volunteers, or driving voters, I spent Election Day afternoon in the cardiologist's office. (Fortunately, I had voted weeks before.)

Two months later, after four doctor's appointments, two EKGs, an echocardiogram, and wearing a heart monitor for thirty days, the diagnosis was that my heart beats fast sometimes. Meanwhile, I did some reading, talked with friends, and concluded that the problem on November 5th was that I was exhausted and incredibly anxious about the election. I had been pushing myself too hard—staying up late, sleeping unevenly, worrying too much—and had gotten generally out of whack.

By the time I got the official diagnosis, I had begun to apply my own remedies. One was to figure out how to sleep better. I had been struggling with sleep for over a decade, ever since menopause, and although I had read articles and queried friends about strategies, I decided to research the issue again. The best advice I found was simple—get up at the same time every day, even on weekends. I tried it and it worked. I got up at the same time every day, went to bed when I got sleepy, and slept. A gentle rhythm has returned to my sleeping and my waking hours. I also revived my meditation practice, worked a little less, and paid more attention to physical clues that I might be getting stressed out.

Now, several months later, my heart only beats fast when I ignore what I have learned, get over-stimulated late in the day, or read too much email before bed. And I've returned to trusting my heart.

Calendar

* = RCWMS events. For registration form and more information: www.rcwms.org.

*March 5, 2013, Tuesday, 9:00 am–6:00 pm
LABYRINTH WALK AT DUKE CHAPEL
Duke Chapel, Duke University, Durham, NC
Free and open to the public.

March 8, 2013, 3:00–8:00 pm
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATION
Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC
Event is free. More: www.womengather.org

March 10, 2013, 2:00 pm–5:00 pm
ALICE FEST
Center for Doc. Studies, Duke Univ., Durham, NC
Film & media event to showcase work by NC women
Cost: Free and open to the public. Please RSVP.
Contact: infoAliceFest@gmail.com, alicefest.org

*March 15–16, 2013
Friday 7:00–9:00 pm & Saturday 9:30 am–3:30 pm
CREATING STORIES TO KEEP: Unearthing the Secrets of Powerful Narrative
Durham, NC
In this workshop, we will give voice to our own wild inner lives. From deep within ourselves, we will pull stories we had no idea were there, and learn how to mold them into narratives with energy and momentum. Open to writers of all genres and levels of experience, men and women.
Leader: Carol Henderson, writer and editor
Cost: \$125
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

March 20, 2013, 5:30–6:30 pm
THE POWER OF THIS STORY: A Public Conversation about Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Durham, NC 1960-1990 (Panel followed by Reception)
Sallie Bingham Center, 217 Perkins Library, Duke Univ. Durham, NC
Panelists: Jeanette Stokes, RCWMS; Kat Turner, Lesbian Health; Donna Giles, TALF and Feminary
Free and open to the public.

April 3, 2013, 5:30–6:30 pm
THE POWER OF THIS STORY: A Public Conversation about Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Durham, NC 1960-1990 (Panel followed by Reception)
Durham Co. Library, 300 N. Roxboro St., Durham, NC
Panelists: Mandy Carter, SCLC and WRL; Caitlin Breedlove, SONG, and Steve Schewel, NC Independent
Free and open to the public.

*April 4, 2013, Friday, 7:00 pm
READING by Priscilla Stuckey
RCWMS, 1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC
The author of *Kissed by a Fox & Other Stories of Friendship in Nature* will share essays that blend personal reflections with spirituality, philosophy, geology, ecology, and more.
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

*April 5, 2013, Saturday, 2:00–4:30 pm
WRITING WORKSHOP with Priscilla Stuckey
RCWMS, 1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC
Spring is the perfect time to sweeten our connection with nature, both the nature out of doors and the nature in our own bodies and hearts. Using simple writing and meditative exercises, we will practice tuning our attention to the images that arise from within, savoring the mystery of these sacred connections. Dress comfortably to spend part of the time outdoors. Bring writing tools (pen, paper, or laptop) and a willing heart.
Leader: Priscilla Stuckey is a writer, scholar, and Earth advocate with a passion for reconnecting people with nature. In her new book, *Kissed by a Fox: And Other Stories of Friendship in Nature*, she uses her own



encounters with trees, creeks, or animals to arrive at sweeter cultural stories about nature.
Cost: \$25
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

*April 12, 2013, Friday, 1:00 pm
A TRADITIONAL JAPANESE TEA GATHERING
The Sarah P. Duke Gardens, Durham, NC
Join RCWMS for a traditional Japanese Tea Ceremony. Enjoy the calm simplicity of the tearoom and the natural beauty of the gardens. This will be a small group.
Leader: Nancy Hamilton and others
Cost: \$25
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

April 12–14, 2013
WRITE TO SOUL IN THE DESERT
Ghost Ranch/Casa del Sol, Abiquiu, NM
Leader: Lynne Hinton
Contact: www.ghostranch.org

*April 19–21 2013, Friday–Sunday
OUR NATURE, IN NATURE: A Women's Retreat
Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, Whitsett, NC
In the spring, we are called to be outside, relishing earth's warm winds, colorful blooms, and blue skies. The natural world, mirror of our own nature, invites us to nurture, empower, and transform ourselves. Indigenous cultures knew the sacredness of the natural world, its seasons, and its compass directions. Together we will explore the wisdom of each direction as it pertains to our current life situations. As we establish a safe community together, we will spend time in Council practice and alone time on the land to experience its messages for us. Camping is an option. Elder women and younger women will learn from and inspire one another.
Leaders: Pat Webster, a clinical psychologist, and Anita McLeod, who directs the RCWMS Elder Women Project.
Cost: \$275. Register early, space is limited.
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

April 27–28, 2013, Sat. & Sun., 9:00 am–4:00 pm
FINDING MEANING IN THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE:
A Two-Day Sage-ing® Intensive Workshop
The Olive Branch Center, Charlotte, NC
Sage-ing is a model for living one's elder years more consciously, joyfully, and compassionately.
Leaders: Charlotte M. Carlson, PhD, Jungian Analyst and Gary A. Carlson, PhD, retired research scientist
Cost: \$275, some scholarships available
Contact: Gary, 505-897-1850, cannmgary@aol.com

*May 5–12, 2013
WEEK OF QUIET & WRITING FOR WOMEN
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
An unstructured week that includes days of quiet and writing and evenings of readings and conversation.
Cost: \$750, includes lodging and meals.
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

May 12–18, 2013
CHOOSING CONSCIOUS ELDERHOOD
Ghost Ranch, New Mexico
This retreat, for people 50 and up, is an opportunity to learn and experience powerful practices that support your ongoing journey toward a conscious elderhood.
Leaders: Ron Pevney and Anne Wennhold
Cost \$1,445
Contact: www.centerforconsciouseldering.com

*September 22–29, 2013
WEEK OF QUIET & WRITING FOR WOMEN
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
An unstructured week that includes days of quiet and writing and evenings of readings and conversation.
Cost: \$750, includes lodging and meals.
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

Thick Places

Thick Places: Annalee's Kitchen

by Julia Sendor

It's a Saturday night in Raleigh County, West Virginia, and Annalee Peters is getting her facial hair waxed. A predictably motley group of visitors—children, grandchildren, and young environmentalists -- are gathered around Annalee's kitchen table while her daughter, Nikki, heats up the wax.

Annalee's face, at 69, is handsome, broad, and twinkley-eyed, her hair angled in a jaunty bob. When she puts on her Sunday silks, she is a knockout. Now, she turns to us all with that no-nonsense set of her jaw that I know so well: "As we women age, our testosterone levels rise and our facial hair grows," she explains. "I can't go to church tomorrow looking like this!"

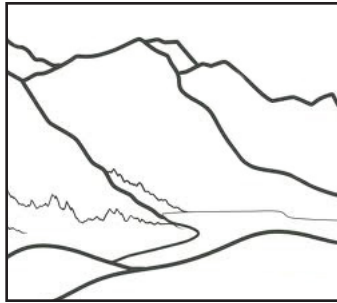
And once again Annalee's kitchen is working its magic—marching awkward mysteries right into the light to hold them up calmly for inspection. Here, nothing stays embarrassing, but everything can turn familiar and funny: something we can share. When I first stepped into Annalee's kitchen three years ago, on a rainy Sunday afternoon in October, I thought it was a party. Annalee was serving big bowls of chili with saltines to her children and grandchildren, brother and sister-in-law, and some neighbors. "How often do you have parties like this?" I asked, hoping to be invited to the next one, too.

"Oh, honey, this is what we do every day."

Annalee's kitchen is where you can nearly guarantee to find three generations every night. It's where family, where neighbors, where even dreadlocked environmental activists come for coffee, meatloaf, green beans, yeast bread, and cinnamon rolls. It's where farts are prized beyond all other additions to the conversation, for their source of laughter and—in the case of a few exemplary ones—for their source of a new legend to retell through the ages. I've even witnessed Annalee produce one of her own and then flash a smile of pure sweetness, delighted to treat her family to so much laughter.

Annalee's kitchen is where rollicking abundance meets dignity. The tables overflow with baked goods, magazines, letters, medicine bottles, and daily new purchases from Goodwill. But the people get nourished like royalty and the bills get paid like clockwork. The jokes and teasing and bickering may fly, the farts and hair waxing and even earwax-removal earn a jolly peanut gallery. But each day the children who've grown up here go off to work as the mine inspectors and nurses who help hold up the world. Annalee herself was the beloved secretary of the local high school for 42 years and, in the process, cheerleader and track coach, bus driver, even pinch-hitting cafeteria cook. Her husband George, who died before I knew Annalee, was the school's equally beloved history teacher and assistant principal. You can mention his name up and down the valley, and get the same response: "Best teacher I ever had."

Annalee's house sits on a rich and loamy piece of bottom land, curled into a crook of the Coal River. The yard is a registered farm, with a small grove of blueberry bushes and sprawling gardens that tangle with weeds—yet unleash a bounty of beans, peppers, tomatoes, squash, potatoes, corn, and fat golden pumpkins. At the end of the day, the garden's beans will be shelled, the tomatoes sliced, the corn boiled



for all to eat. From her garden and kitchen, Annalee routinely feeds a dozen people every night.

I remember the first time I heard the phrase "thin places" -- places where the boundary between heaven and earth dissolves. In "thin places," the dust of everyday living seems to float away; you may feel unsettled and uplifted. Celtic tradition was especially intent on finding thin places, the better to reach the sacred. Yet over the years I have come to seek the sacred in thick places. I look for places where there was no stratifying boundary between heaven and earth in the first place, but where heaven infuses the earth with fertility. In the rich places I love, the dust of everyday living connects me to the most beautiful and intricate patterns I could imagine. I feel settled and grounded. I feel home.

Annalee's kitchen is, of course, a thick place. It is one of the thickest places I know. But here is the kicker, and here is why I love and respect and cling to this place so dearly: it is a home in a coal-mining valley that is rapidly becoming uninhabitable. In the Coal River Valley, mountaintop removal mines scrape a mountain bare, and use explosives to blast off hundreds of feet of rock to reach thin seams of coal. The mines dump the waste into the valleys, which buries and pollutes the streams. Then after companies process the coal, they end up with a toxic black ooze called sludge. They store the sludge in unlined earthen dams perched high above towns, or inject the sludge into old underground mines, where it can leach into the water table and poison the residents.

There's a strangely intertwined pattern to the disintegration. The mountains are flattened and the streams smothered. The mines mechanize and employ fewer people, the mines break up the unions, storefronts close, whole communities that once had their own YMCA become ghost towns, people get sicker, people die or move away. The Coal River Valley has taken some terrible hits. In 2010, 29 underground miners died in a mine explosion. The investigations are still uncovering horrific negligence that proves how companies often treat their workers the same way they treat the land—as if it were disposable.

So many other losses had already come before. Among them: Annalee's husband George, who spent summer vacations working in a coal processing lab. The lab's harsh chemicals literally poisoned him; he died from neurological complications. Annalee is now representing him, as part of a class action lawsuit with other former workers. The valley also lost its high school to school consolidation. I've heard stories of the community members who fought that school's closing for three years, raising money for a lawyer through hot dog sales. I've heard about the final public hearing for the school, where 400 people packed the auditorium and kept the microphone busy till 2 a.m.

Yet, this is where families have grown and stayed on through the generations. Here, everything is oriented by the river: the store downriver from the church is "below" it; the post office upriver from the school is "above" it. On an April night at the Dairy Queen, you will still find old-timers showing off their mesh bags of morel "Molly moocher" mushrooms, collected from secret spots on the mountain. Through the years, for better or worse, the connections between people and the land have woven into the tightest of tapestries. And now it is unraveling.

(Continued on back.)

In Nature

by Anita McLeod

Around me the trees stir in their leaves and call out "stay awhile." —Mary Oliver

Walking in the forest these February days and sitting by a creek swollen with recent rain, I notice a whiff of early spring in the air. As I listen for the deep voices in the moving waters, I hear the early music of the spring peepers, the sound of the wind in the trees and the birdsongs, blending together to create a symphony of early spring. The awakening forest floor smells of acrid damp soil and decaying leaves. The mosses on the forest floor glow bright green and the buds on the trees appear to be swelling with growth. Tiny speckled foliage of the trout lily push up through the forest floor between the brown leaves. The early morning and late afternoon light lengthens as the sun begins its return, reminding me of an experience I had in February a few years ago when I went to the forest before dawn to spend the day in silence.

It was dark and cold when I arrived at 5:00 a.m. and I paced back and forth to keep warm. As the sky began to turn gold, I noticed the first rays of sunlight touch the base of a nearby tree and slowly move up the trunk and I began to weep with relief. The sun was returning and bringing warmth and light to creation. As the sun's energy warmed my cold body, my heart filled with gratitude for the miracle of that moment.

I go to the forest trails searching for those magical times when my soul reminds me that I am a part of creation. I long to re-live those crucial moments when the earth wraps me in her arms and whispers that I belong to her. I am reminded over and over that we live in a beautiful universe. Experiencing ourselves as creatures belonging to the natural world can be transforming and numinous, leading us back to our sacred connection with the earth.

The Elder Women project offers workshops that nurture and strengthen elder women. I'm excited about a new workshop Pat Webster and I will be leading in April 2013. It will take place at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, a place consecrated to the renewal of the human-earth relationship. We will be camping on the land, and we'll have opportunities to explore our depths safely in the natural world.

April 19–21, 2013, Friday–Sunday
OUR NATURE, IN NATURE: A Woman's Camping Retreat
Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, near Greensboro, NC
Limited to 12 participants.
Leaders: Pat Webster and Anita McLeod
Cost: \$275 Register early, space is limited. See the Calendar for event details. Scholarships will be available.
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com.



Thick...

From their home, Annalee and her family have lived through the losses with a clear-eyed tenacity. They speak plainly about what they've seen, along with a handful of other local organizers. That's why they also embrace the young, out-of-state environmental activists, who have caused quite a stir by following their ideals to this small, steep-sloped valley. Annalee's kitchen both welcomed us and kept us humble. It showed us the thickness of the valley—and reminded us how its layered richness had formed without any help from our ideals. I felt honored to call myself Annalee's neighbor, and to treat the valley as even a temporary home.

I don't live there anymore. If thin places inspire their pilgrims to keep seeking an ethereal sacredness, Annalee's kitchen moves me to build sacred thickness in my own life. I returned to my own home county in North Carolina, where my own family lives. I am learning to grow good food, to feed what I hope will be a larger but equally motley collection as those who gather in Annalee's kitchen. But whatever grander vision I have for my life, it has to do something with that Saturday night in the kitchen. In a valley where the mountains and people alike are emptying out, it is more vital than ever to hold firm to a place where family, friends, and strangers can listen to a retired secretary explain why she needs to wax her facial hair. It is earthy, and it is heavenly—and Annalee will be a knockout come Sunday morning.

RCWMS

RCWMS is a thirty-five-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 especially grateful for support from the Kalliopeia Foundation and from Emerald Isle Realty.

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