

South of the Garden

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

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June 2015

Making Art

by Jeanette Stokes

I'm happier when I'm making stuff. I've been that way since I was a child.

In the summers, my mother would pack me up with an art project and drive me to my grandmother's house where she'd leave me for a couple of weeks. I loved being in my grandmother's tiny town, Grandview, Texas, population 1,000, so different from the big city of Tulsa, Oklahoma where we lived. When my grandmother and I weren't visiting elderly relatives or buying bushels of peaches or corn, I would sit at her dining room table and color with crayons, weave potholders, create paint-by-number ballerinas, or rub grout around one-inch ceramic squares set into the top of a wooden tray.

Years later, I would knit and crochet my way through college, quilt and make hooked rugs in seminary, and sew curtains for my first apartment in the late 1970s. For a long while after that, I was too busy creating a nonprofit organization to make things.

When I was in my forties, the urge to make stuff returned. One afternoon in the fall of 1992, an artist friend, Ramona Morgan, shoved a copy of *The Artist's Way* into my hands and said, "Read this book. This book changed my life." I took the book home, followed its directions, began to write three pages longhand every morning, and with that, the desire to make things began to stir in me again.

About a year later, my friend Jewel invited me over to her house to play with watercolors. She had been collecting paints, brushes, and paper for several years and had finally gotten around to trying them out. She was having fun and wanted me to try it, too. So, I went to Jewel's house, splashed some paint onto small sheets of paper, and enjoyed it well enough. That was a Saturday afternoon.

The next Tuesday evening, I had what I can only call, "a watercolor attack." I was home alone, which happened a lot, because my then-husband worked late and traveled frequently for his job. All of a sudden, I wanted watercolor supplies, and I wanted them "RIGHT NOW!" So, I got in my car and drove to the nearest craft store to get some. I had no idea what I was doing. I didn't know one brush from the next or the difference between brands of paint, but I didn't care. I bought some supplies, took them home, put water in a jar and started putting paint on paper. I was in love. That was twenty-two years ago, and the romance is still going strong.

I don't think I still have any of my paintings from that first Tuesday night. It's just as well. I used poor quality paint and inferior paper, but I was having fun.

Eventually, Jewel and I went to a watercolor workshop with an out-of-town expert, which was useful but mildly traumatic. I was so intimidated by the roomful of competent artists, that at one point I fled out the back door of the art room in tears. But I stuck it out for the week and learned how to care for brushes, what constitutes good watercolor paper, and some of the differences among paints.

(Continued inside.)



Vesperbild

Note: Sarah Woodford's essay "Finding the Vesperbild" won second place in the RCWMS Essay Contest this year.

by Sarah Woodford

She is called Vesperbild, the German version of the pietà. Created in the fourteenth-century Rhineland, she now sits in a quiet hall at The Cloisters, a Medieval art museum in New York City.

If you wish to find her, you must make your way through the museum's corridors and arches, past the inviting courtyard, and down towards the large glass cases that hold small artifacts. And almost by chance you will see her, in a hallway laden with other artwork and crucifixes. She will be at the very end. I hope you will notice how much bigger she is, compared to Jesus, who she holds in her arms. Her face is angled to the side and her forehead is much longer, much broader, than it ought to be. Though her eyes wrinkle closed with pain, her mouth does not open in anguish. Instead, her lips are softly closed, as if a soothing prayer will soon fall from them.

Slim, dark-coated New Yorkers will move around her (and you) with curious eyes and tilted heads. They will speak quietly to one another, perhaps about her origins or about the most recent thought piece they read in *The Times* that made mention of her, and if your ears are better than mine, you will hear the exact content of these hushed conversations. But, if your ears are like mine, you will not. You will half-listen, distracted by the sublime beauty this sculpture exudes. And the susurrus of sound will become the soft drone of an intelligible prayer, inviting you to see God, to see life, embodied in her likeness.

When did we first meet? It feels so long ago now, but I first encountered her as a twenty-two-year-old graduate student. Caught between readings and classes, a group of my Yale Divinity School friends and I decided to go into New York City. We thought that the liveliness of the city and quiet of The Cloisters would be a nice break from our ivory grindstone. A car ride and a few subway stops later, we were walking through the museum's stone corridors. Turning left when the others turned right, I lost my group—but, my choice led me to a hall, lined with crucifixes and richly colored paintings (or were they tapestries?). I began to move down it, allowing the objects to envelope me in their silent reverence, until a thoughtfully tilted face and a smooth, broad forehead stopped me. What was this? Who was this? It was Mary, mourning a crucified Jesus in her lap. She was the pietà.

But, she was different from any pietà I had encountered before.

The Italian depictions I remembered were usually pretty and serene. Like Michelangelo's creation that sits in Saint Peter's Basilica, symmetry and marble made Mary's grief beautiful. This Mary was not made of marble, and the symmetry of her face was distorted by eyes scrunched shut and a forehead too broad and too long. This Mary's grief seemed messy and shockingly human.

(Continued inside.)

Calendar

* = RCWMS events. More information: www.rcwms.org.

*May 31, 2015, Sunday, 2:00 pm
A READING by Maura Wolf from *What Matters Most*
Okun-Stern Loft, Durham, NC
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com
RSVP: bit.ly/WMMReading

June 6, 2015, Saturday, 12:00–4:00 pm
TIME TO PUT YOUR INNER NIGHT OWL TO SLEEP?
A Sounder Sleep System® Workshop
2726 Croasdaile Dr., Garden View Offices, Durham, NC
Work with the rhythms of your own body to create restful and restorative sleep.
Leader: Betty Wolfe, MDiv, BCB, GCFFcm
Cost: \$75 before 5/27; \$95 after.
Contact: bettywolfe@lessonswithease.com, 919-794-4139

June 22–26, 2015
FOCUSING ON FORM: Workshop for Women Writers
Meredith College, Raleigh, NC
Includes poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction.
Leaders: Carol Henderson, Marjorie Hudson Ruth Moose, and Nancy Peacock
Cost: \$350
Contact: Ashley Hogan, hogana@meredith.edu

*June 25, 2015, Thursday, 7:00 pm
A READING by Erin Lane from *Lessons in Belonging*
RCWMS trustee Erin Lane will read from her new memoir, *Lessons in Belonging*.
RCWMS, 1202 Watts St., Durham, NC
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

*June 28, 2015, Sunday, 1:30–4:30pm
CREATING YOUR OWN COUNCIL CIRCLE
In a comfortable home in Durham with a cat
Intergenerational workshop designed to help you create your own safe, nourishing council circle of support.
Leaders: Anita Mcleod and Sherylyn Pitt
Cost: \$45, bit.ly/CouncilCircle
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

*June 30, 2015, Tuesday, 7:00–9:00 pm
MIDSUMMER WRITING NIGHT
RCWMS Office, 1202 Watts St., Durham, NC
Come for fun, camaraderie, and inner exploration through rich, daring writing. Throw doubt and judgment to the wind and honor the heat, passion, fire, and fullness of the summer solstice. With the full moon and 4th of July just days away, take a moment to reflect, dig deep, and see what this time of year is saying to you.
Leader: Rebecca Welper, MFA
Cost: Sliding scale, \$10–\$25
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com
Questions: Rebecca Welper, rebeccawelper@gmail.com

*July 26, Aug. 23, & Sept. 20, 2015, Sundays, 1:30–5:00 pm
CONSCIOUS ELDERING: Going Deeper Series
In a comfortable home in Durham with a cat
Three-part series on the powerful inner work of creating an elderhood rich in meaning, passion and wisdom.
7/26 Life Review: Legacy of Our Stories with Anita Mcleod and Sherylyn Pitt
8/23 Compassion, Forgiveness and Letting Go with Linda Barnett and Sherylyn Pitt
9/20 Finding Passion and Purpose with Stacy Grove and Sherylyn Pitt
Cost: \$110 (or \$45 per session). bit.ly/ConsciousEldering
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

August 17–23, 2015
MUSIQUE! HEART, BODY AND SOUL!
Chateau du Pin, Loire Valley, France (sci-le-pin.com)
Leaders: Musicians Sloan Wainwright (www.sloanwainwright.com) & Alison Weiner (www.mahaloarts.com)



Drawing by Sue Sneddon

Cost: \$2,500. Open to all. No experience is necessary.
Contact: Peg Gignoux, mjgignoux@gmail.com

August 21–December 12, 2015
PAULI MURRAY: Imp, Crusader, Dude, Priest
Cameron Gallery, Scrap Exchange, Durham, NC
Exhibit offers an introduction to Pauli Murray's life as an activist, attorney, poet, and priest and highlights her personal struggles to attain an integrated body, mind, and spirit. Opening on August 21, Birthday Party on November 20, and more.
Contact: www.paulimurrayproject.org or www.scrapexchange.org

August 31–September 4, 2015
TABLE ROCK WRITERS WORKSHOP
Wildacres Retreat, Little Switzerland, North Carolina
Contact: tablerockwriters.com, ge@tablerockwriters.com

*September 20–27, 2015
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

*October 1–4, 2015, 7:00 pm Thurs. to 3:00 pm Sunday
HERONS WALK ON WATER'S EDGE, A Retreat
Cedar Cross Retreat Center, Louisburg NC
The restorative effects of spending intentional time outdoors in community are well-researched and documented. When we return to nature, we rekindle a sense of belonging and groundedness. We ignite awe and wonder in the Sacredness of "all our relations." Herons Walk will offer contemplative, mindful, and ceremonial practices in the natural world. During this intergenerational retreat, we will return to a natural pace, utilizing wisdom rooted in intuition, imagination, and bodily sensations. This practice of returning to nature may be the most powerful reciprocal healing medicine of our time. We gather in circle to strengthen and restore our relationship with our authentic selves and the natural world.
Cost: \$435 before 9/1, \$475 after 9/1. Single room, \$60 extra. (Includes room and food). Limited scholarships.
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com
Register: bit.ly/1EqMb2a

*October 22–23, 2015, Thursday & Friday
HOMEGROWN: NC Women's Preaching Festival
Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church, Durham, NC
Dozens of NC clergywomen will gather to encourage and inspire one another, share and learn, and hone their craft. Includes preaching from festival attendees and conversations on the art of proclamation in all its forms.
Leaders: Rev. Dr. Debra Mumford, prof. of homiletics, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary will be the Thursday night preacher. Many others TBA.
Sponsors: Duke Divinity Women's Center & RCWMS
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com
Details: ncwomenpreaching.wordpress.com

October 26–November 16, 2015 (4 Mondays) 7–9 pm
TURNING POINTS: Intergenerational Writing Workshop
RCWMS Office, 1202 Watts St., Durham, NC
Together we will explore life turning points, using writing as a spiritual and self-revelatory practice.
Workshop dates: 10/26, 11/2, 11/9, 11/16.
Leaders: Anita McLeod, director of RCWMS Elder Women Project, and Rebecca Welper, MFA
Cost: Sliding scale, \$35–100. Scholarships available.
<http://bit.ly/TurningPointsWorkshop>
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

Future Weeks of Quiet & Writing:
January 1–8, 2016
May 8–15, 2016

Art...

For instance, I learned that if you paint a big fat stripe of phthalo blue across the paper, you will probably be stuck with the stripe forever. I ruined a painting of a perfectly nice-looking fish by putting a great big stripe of phthalo blue on top of it. I was trying to paint water. When I asked the teacher how to fix it, he just shook his head. But I've never forgotten that phthalo stains.

Now, I paint patterns and colors on large pieces of paper more often than I try to make a painting look like something. I have painted a few landscapes or scenes from places I have visited, like Santa Fe, New Mexico, but since I forgot to learn to draw, realistic art is challenging for me. So I paint squiggles, doodles, and flowers that look a lot like the ones I made as a child.

I used to think that if I painted long enough I'd become more sophisticated and stop painting patterns. But eventually I came to understand that those lines and shapes are my visual vocabulary. My very own, like my accent or my brown hair. So, I just keep making my marks. And since all I've ever really been trying to do is to delight and entertain myself, I just keep doing what I seem to enjoy.

When I quit my job in 1995, I wanted a place to paint, so I rented a small space in a neighborhood building that was once a country grocery store. Built around 1900, it was a thriving business for seventy-five years until it could no longer compete with the superstores like Kroger. The interior of our small building is broken up by low walls, which allow the light and air to move through. When I went back to work for the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South a couple of years later, the center moved into the building. We now share the space with a landscape designer and a freelance writer. I've been happily working and painting there for nearly twenty years.

After I quit my job in 1995, I took a few months for a self-styled sabbatical. During that period, Jewel and I decided to ask our friend Danny if he wanted to make art with us. Danny lived in a big two-story Victorian in Durham. Well, actually, he lived on the second floor. For a number of years, he rented out the first floor, but at some point he stopped that and the rooms sat empty. So, when we approached him about making art with us, Danny said, "Sure. Let's do it in the downstairs of my house."

Jewel was unemployed at the time, Danny was trying to figure out what to do after a successful career in retail, and I had lots of free time, so we started making art together once a week and called it Art Camp.

The best part was hanging out with each other. Well, that and never having to clean up. We worked at a huge table, in what had once been the formal dining room, and began by making crazy collages. We piled the table and a sideboard with magazines, paper, glue, tubes of paint, old brushes, and half-finished projects. When those surfaces were full, we started in on the floor. Before long the room was so littered with torn-up magazines, snips of paper, glitter, and bits of string that you had to be careful where you stepped.

Every six months or so, one of us would find a broom and clear a path so we didn't fall down. I cringe when I remember the bathroom sink, which was sparkling white when we began and came to look like a Jackson Pollock painting or the utility sink in a fourth grade art room.

We were grown ups—in our forties—and we were having the time of our lives. When my first marriage broke up a couple years later, I was really glad to have

(Continued on back.)



columbine

Drawing by Sue Sneddon

Vesperbild...

I walked up to the label on the wall next to her. Someone created her in the fourteenth century somewhere in the Rhineland. They did not call her pietà. Instead, they called her Vesperbild.

I stepped closer to the statue. Jesus was sallow and emaciated, his ribs more pointed than the spearhead that stuck out from his right side. His were the marks of a long-suffering illness rather than those of crucifixion. Bleeding buboes, their blood droplets still containing traces of brilliant red pigment, covered his body. His image made me recall a lecture I had heard earlier that week, in which my professor spoke about fourteenth-century German plague hospitals. He told us that many of them contained religious imagery depicting Jesus as a plague patient. A reminder to the sick that they were not alone as they suffered and eventually died from the Black Death.

I stepped back and looked at Mary's smooth, broad forehead. What a powerful impact something like the Vesperbild must have made on her Rhineland audience: a visceral reminder that though they must undergo deep suffering, the Mother of God would be behind them, sorrowful, yet quietly praying for their speedy journey into light perpetual.

I heard my friends calling me. They had noticed my absence and the time. We had to get back to New Haven, back to our lectures and to our books. I moved towards their voices and away from the statue, but I could not look away. At the end of the hall I lingered, thankful that for a few moments, I saw human beings form God in their own image. Through the Vesperbild, they brought the Divine into their suffering lives.

In his book, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, Henri Nouwen wrote that religious images helped to give shape to his prayers and to his spiritual longings—whenever tired or without words, the images did the prayerful work for him. This seems true to me. And, it seems especially true for the fourteenth-century eyes that looked upon this particular Vesperbild. So weakened by plague, or by grief over loved ones lost, the image did the speaking for them. But, the Vesperbild showed me something else: our lives, our experiences, give shape to how we perceive these religious images. As we age and encounter hardship, our lives unconsciously—and sometimes consciously—change the images' spiritual contours. We see what we did not see before because we live what we did not live before.

Now I am twenty-eight. Graduate school is a few years behind me, yet I still live in New Haven, working as a library director in a Yale-affiliated organization. After a stressful summer that started with my mother dying unexpectedly, I once more needed a break. Dear friends of mine, now living in New York City, suggested that we visit The Cloisters. I agreed.

We met inside the museum on a grey and rainy day. After looking at the featured exhibits, I wandered away from my friends and found myself in the hall that quietly teemed with crucifixes and colorful religious art (I still can't remember if there were tapestries). The Vesperbild still sat at the end of the hallway, mourning Jesus. He was still thin and his buboes still gaped and bled. She still angled her head in a thoughtful manner and her forehead was just as broad and as long as I had remembered it.

But this time, I noticed the emotions on her face. I saw the pain that gathered around her eyes, a sign of intense mourning. Her face angled to her right, as if she was trying to come up with an answer to the frail, dead

(Continued on back.)

Vesperbild...

"why" that occupied her lap. Why did her son have to die? And why must she now live life without him?

Yet her mouth, which should have been tightened by grief, was not. It was relaxed, perhaps made peaceful by some internal act of prayer.

I could not look away from her, especially when her face held those two emotions so beautifully in tension. And because of her faith, her face also held them in perfect symmetry. No lecture guided me this time. I understood her, because over the past few months, my face had mirrored hers: eyes closed in anguishing grief, yet at peace, strangely at peace, because I prayed to a God who resurrects and redeems the dead.

I felt a presence behind me. My friends had found me.

"This is my favorite piece in all of Cloisters," I said. "Isn't she beautiful? I've never seen anything quite like her."

"She's so much bigger than Christ," one of my companions observed, "I wonder if that's due to the German mystic tradition. They write extensively about how Mary imagined Jesus as a baby in her arms after he was crucified."

She was much bigger than Christ, sturdy underneath his frail frame. I wondered where her strength came from. Perhaps it was from her soft mouth and the inner life of faith it reflected. Gazing at her image, with friends beside me, my graduate school days seemed far away. Now, I felt more like a fourteenth-century Rhinelander. Though I was not dying of plague, I was mourning the presence of death in my life. I too, was seeking solace from something that was irreversible, full of pain and of grief and of God's peace.

A graduate of Yale Divinity School, Sarah Woodford, or S.L. Woodford as she's usually known, spends the majority of her time surrounded by stories. By day, she runs a small, Yale-affiliated library, tending to the intellectual offspring of thinkers and mystics. By night, she creates her own stories: non-fiction and fiction about the mundane, the frivolous, the spiritual, and the magical. Her work has appeared in the Young Raven's Literary Review and the The Living Church. She keeps a weekly writer's blog at: poetryandpushpins.com.

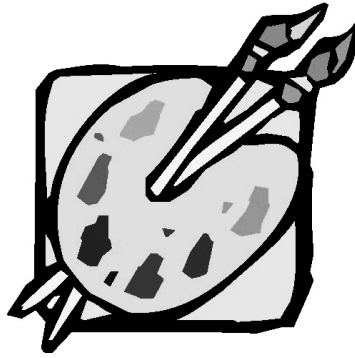
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Website: www.rcwmsnc.org

News blog: www.rcwms.org/blog/

Books & media blog: wordsandspirit.tumblr.com



Art...

Art Camp for community and support. Eventually, Jewel got another job, Danny decided to move to Mexico, and I went on painting.

My art supplies and my office are in the same physical space, which gives me the illusion that I am always about to make art. The sad truth is that days, even weeks, go by without my so much as picking up a brush. Then I'll remember how much happier I am when I'm making things, and I will get out a big piece of watercolor paper, sketch long ribbons of green, orange, and purple with crayons, and paint swaths of watercolor over them. The paint flees from the waxy lines, colors blend to form new colors, and pools get trapped in unexpected places. I can get totally absorbed just watching a puddle of cadmium red blend with lemon yellow and dry. After that, I add more layers of paint. Then, I look for pleasing shapes or color combinations to use in the next painting. When the finished pieces pile up, I cut them up to make greeting cards and small books, which I sell so I can buy more paint and paper.

The cycle continues, and I go on painting.

Jeanette Stokes is the Executive Director of the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South and an ordained Presbyterian minister.

RCWMS

RCWMS is a thirty-seven-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 contribute, contact RCWMS or visit www.rcwms.org. We are especially grateful for support of the Kalliopeia Foundation, Emerald Isle Realty, A-Squared Fund of Triangle Community Foundation, and the estate of Nancy Ann Monte Santo.

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