

South of the Garden

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

Volume 36, Number 4

December 2015

Shelter

by Jeanette Stokes

I've been thinking about Syrian refugees; the attacks in Paris, Beirut, and elsewhere; Black Lives Matter; Ta-Nehisi Coates; and white Christians. These things seem connected, perhaps because they are all about how we set ourselves apart from one another.

When my ancestors arrived in South Carolina in 1772, they were welcomed and given land to farm. When African Americans arrived, many were in chains and enslaved. We white people ask Hispanic people when they came to the US and some rightly say, "The US moved to us." Now some politicians want to refuse Syrian refugees and register people of Middle Eastern descent. This is the worst sort of hatefulness. For US governors to bar Syrian refugees is scapegoating and plays into people's fears.

At this time of year, this unwelcoming attitude is ironic. As filmmaker Lexi Alexander tweeted in late November, "The entire South puts on the Nativity play at their church during Christmas. Which is about a Middle Eastern couple desperate for shelter."

The Syrian refugee crisis became more personal when I read reports from Becky Thompson, a friend and college professor in Boston. While attending a workshop on the Greek island of Lesbos last summer, Becky became aware of Syrians who were crossing the sea in flimsy boats, arriving on foreign soil, and walking miles before reaching any sort of reception station. Local villagers tried to help as best they could. Becky and others from the workshop bought bottles of water to give to the beleaguered people who were fleeing for their very lives. Though she could not speak their language, she walked with them on a dusty road as they made their way toward the hope of safety and refuge.

In November, I attended a three-day symposium honoring John Hope Franklin's centennial. If you don't know the work of this remarkable historian (and Oklahoma native) look him up. There, I was reminded of the history of slavery and racism. One fascinating speech by Sven Beckert, the author of *Empire of Cotton*, outlined the 500-year history of cotton and its role in creating international capitalism.

I was lucky to hear Ta-Nehisi Coates earlier this year when he spoke at Duke. This McArthur Genius award winner recently won a National Book Award for his newest book, *Between the World and Me*. One point he makes is that it seems to be socially acceptable for white people to assume that Black people and Hispanic people are prone to criminality. This myth has been propagated in this land since whites first arrived. We have systematically plundered and impoverished communities of color and then blamed them for what happens in the face of poor schools, no jobs, and violent police.

(Continued on back.)



Sarai/Hagar

(Note: Joy Wahnefried and Amber Burgin were selected as the student preachers for the 2015 HOMEGROWN: NC Women's Preaching Festival. Their splendid sermons were preached together and are reproduced here.)

SARAI

by Joy Wahnefried

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. (Gen. 16:1-3 NRSV)

It may be that I shall obtain children by her. Obtain children, what a strange phrase. Sarai wants to obtain children as if they were property. As if they were a status symbol, something you get because that is what respectable women do. How many times have we done something because it is the respectable thing to do? We buy the right house in the right neighborhood. We go to the right school. We learn the right words. We buy the power suit. Stay up late at night so that we can get more work done. We do all of this so that we are respectable. And it's understandable; after all, it's hard enough being a woman. Why would we want to make it any harder on ourselves? So we jump through all the hoops, so that they will respect us when we stand up here. When we sit in the boardroom, when we conduct a meeting. We do this all to obtain for ourselves the respect that our society doesn't hold out freely to us.

It's not easy to play the game, but sometimes playing the game feels easier than challenging the system that punches back when we try to fight it. And so we count the cost of playing the game or at least we think we do.

But do we ever stop to think who has sewed that power suit that gives us respectability? Who was uprooted from that land so that our nice new neighborhood or our nice new church building could be built? While we were off playing the game to be respectable, who wasn't able to play the game? Who was excluded from it all together?

Those are questions better left unasked, because to ask them would be to see the suffering that we participate in, that we inflict sometimes unknowingly, but sometimes knowingly. Deciding that we have earned this new thing that will give us more respectability. After all, just like Sarai we worked for it.

It wasn't just handed to us like it was handed to Abram. We know that Hagar came from Egypt and Sarai was in Egypt just a few chapters ago, working as Pharaoh's concubine. And in exchange for Sarai being used every night in the palace to gratify the

(Continued on inside.)

Calendar

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

December 6, 2015, 1:00–5:00 pm
HOLIDAY SALE
1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC
Contact: stokesnet@aol.com

*December 8, 2015, 11:30 am–2:00 pm
ART OF CONSCIOUS AGING
Colony Hills Clubhouse, 3060 Colony Rd., Durham, NC
Topic: Harvesting Our Nuggets. We will focus on our inner development in the context of world events. Bring a photo of yourself at a younger age. Google world events for your birth year. Newcomers welcome.
Leader: Margaret Herring
Bring a bag lunch. No fee. No need to register.

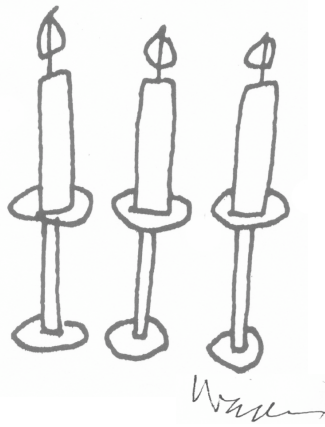
*December 9, 2015, Wednesday, 7:00–9:00 pm
WRITING IN THE DARK
RCWMS Office, 1202 Watts St, Durham, NC
During this time of waning light and increasing chill, let us take time to come together in reflection and stillness. For anyone wanting a respite from holiday busyness or anyone feeling loss or loneliness during this season, come honor the dark and quiet through writing prompts, sharing, and snacks. All levels of writing experience, all genders, and spiritualities are welcome.
Leader: Rebecca Welper, MFA
Cost: \$10 suggested donation
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com
Questions: rebeccawelper@gmail.com

*December 20, 2015, Sunday, 7:00 pm
INTERFAITH CELEBRATION
Beth El Synagogue, 1004 Watts Street, Durham, NC
We gather to reflect on the fading of the light and the promise of its return, on community and connections, on loss and love. All spiritual paths and religious traditions are welcome. We hope you will join us to celebrate with song, readings, dance, and ritual designed to include and connect us all. Please bring a candle.
Suggested donation: \$5–10
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

*January 1–8, 2016
WEEK OF QUIET & WRITING FOR WOMEN
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
An unstructured week of quiet and writing.
Cost: \$750, includes lodging and meals.

*January 17, February 14, March 13, 2016, Sunday, 1:30–4:30 pm
BEFRIENDING DEATH: A Sunday Afternoon Series
In a private home with a cat, Durham, NC
Participants will be invited to contemplate death, to consider practices that might help them be present to themselves and others in the experience of dying, and to reflect on ways to deepen their appreciation of life. Music, poetry, ritual, contemplative practices and small group experiences will be used to enrich the program.
Leaders: Betsy Barton, Jehanne Gheith, Stacy Grove, and Anita McLeod
Cost: \$90. Register: <http://bit.ly/1WkkWBt>
Contact: rcwmsnc@aol.com

*January 19–February 23, 2016 (6 Tuesdays) 6–8 pm
THE ELEMENTS OF STORYTELLING
United Church of Chapel Hill



1321 Martin Luther King Jr Blvd., Chapel Hill, NC
We all have stories inside us but getting them on the page is no small feat. Whether you write fiction or nonfiction, this class will teach you how to draft and shape a story. We will study others' writing to better understand what holds a story up and drives it along. Discussions will also explore technique, including character, plot, and exposition, equally applicable to both genres of writing. There will be weekly writing and reading assignments. Poets are certainly welcome, though we will not examine poetic form in depth.
Leader: Julia Green holds an MFA in fiction writing from the Iowa Writers' Workshop.
Cost: \$150. Register: <http://bit.ly/JuliaGreen>
Questions: julia.green@gmail.com

*February 19–21, 2016, Friday, 2 pm–Sunday, 2 pm
FINDING YOUR MEDIUM: A Weekend of Art at the Beach with Sue Sneddon
Emerald Isle, NC
"I can't draw a straight line." Well, who said you should? Sue Sneddon will lead you in exploring various media for painting and drawing. These will include: pencil, pen and ink, charcoal, pastel, oil pastel, watercolor, gouache, acrylics, and some mixed media options. Let's find the ones that float your boat! Sue will provide all art supplies needed for the workshop. You may also bring any art supplies you have.
Leader: Sue Sneddon has been a full-time painter since 1984. Much of her work has concentrated on the ocean, especially the NC coast, where she now lives.
Cost: Workshop & food, \$375, plus housing in beautiful beach house, \$125 double or \$225 single.
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

*February 26–29, 2016, Fri. 7:00 pm–Mon. 10:00 am
MAKING YOUR ART: An Advanced Workshop with Sue Sneddon
Emerald Isle, NC
For those who've taken Sue's "Finding Your Medium."
Leader: Sue Sneddon (See February 19–21.)
Cost: Workshop & meals \$400 plus housing in beautiful beach house, \$125 double or \$225 single.
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

*March 18–19, 2016, Fri. 7–9 pm, Sat. 9:30 am–3:30 pm
WORKOUTS TO STRETCH YOUR WRITING MUSCLES, with Carol Henderson
Durham, NC
"Writing with spontaneity is the first step to writing well," said Jerome Stern, author of *Making Shapely Fiction*, and Carol Henderson agrees. Writing begets writing, and that's just what we're going to do—write a lot and stretch our writing selves. We'll sample hands-on exercises designed to help us write more deeply and with more authenticity. And we'll work on aspects of craft that will strengthen our understanding and our skills. Good for writers of all genres and all levels of experience.
Leader: Carol Henderson is a writer, editor, and workshop leader who has taught in the US, Europe, and the Middle East. She is the author of *Losing Malcolm*, and *Farther Along: The Writing Journey of Thirteen Bereaved Mothers*, and edited *Wide Open Spaces: Call Stories*. More: www.carolhenderson.com
Cost: \$125. Register: <http://bit.ly/CHenWriting>
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com.

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

Sarai

king, Pharaoh, the text tells us, gave Abram “sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels.” Quite a list of things Sarai earned; Abram got them handed to him. Must have been frustrating.

So it's no wonder that when she is reunited with Abram and safely away from Pharaoh that Sarai wants to be respected. Wants something to give her a bit more power. And in those days, not so much unlike ours, the roots to respectability for females were limited, and try as she might, Sarai was getting nowhere. So she did the sensible thing. The legal thing. She substituted Hagar's body for hers. Choosing respectability over compassion. Choosing to obtain things that would make her days a bit easier rather than question the system that forced her to be a concubine, Hagar to be a slave, and women to need to be mothers in order to be respectable in the first place. As much as I don't like to admit it, as much as I'd like to deny it, I do that too sometimes. I choose respectability over questioning the system that demands I look a certain way to be a pastor. It's easier some days to just put on the “right” dress, say the right words, be the kind of pastor they want me to be, than to constantly question and fight the patriarchy that rules our world. I, like Sarai, don't want to see the horror that comes from my actions. I don't want to see the daily reality of the Hagar's of this world.

HAGAR

by Amber Burgin

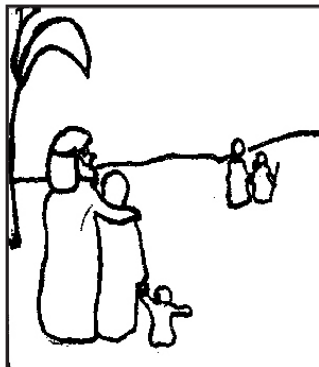
Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, “You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!” But Abram said to Sarai, “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her. (Gen. 16:1-6 NRSV)

I wonder, when Sarai decided to “give” Hagar to Abraham, did she present him with her certificate of purity? Oh. Wait, I forgot. Black women aren't pure. They aren't capable.

And since we can't blame Sarah, we blame Hagar for her own misery.

Perhaps it was her outfit that suggested to Sarah and Abraham that she would be willing to participate in such violation of her personal rights. Surely her outfit was to blame, or her shapely body. Her innate sexuality indicated that she wasn't pure enough to be saved, but she was tainted slightly less than the other slaves. You know, the “field hands.”

What was it that she did that indicated that she and her womb were available for the job of Abraham's concubine?



Hagar...

She was born with brown skin.

And because she was born with what society deems an affliction, she was given no right to say no.

Abraham, the model patriarch, fails to provide a just response in the matter, and why would he? It's a win win in his eyes. Two for the price of one, plus God's promises? You bet I'm down. Besides, Hagar lacks voice...her three fifths of a black life didn't matter. Her agency and her decision-making were taken out of her hands and systemically gifted to Abraham, which he handed to Sarah.

But Sarah had a decision to make. To be, or not to be an ally...and she made a choice.

The Sarah and Hagar dynamic continues to play out from generation to generation. Each time Sarah, in the place of power. Each time offering the opportunity to make a new choice, and the choice is never made.

Ms. Sarah was just as complacent in the big house when Massa Abraham “went in to” Hagar, providing Sarah with companions for her children, who like Ishmael, would have been considered siblings, if it weren't for the fact that one of them was born into purity, patriarchy, and promise, while the other one was cursed with that “one drop” of melanin, that made them less worthy of the promises of the same God.

Ms. Sarah, just as complacent, fought for her right to vote, but when presented with the opportunity to reach back to liberate the black women that were the backbone of the movement, opted to continue with the same power dynamic. Inserting herself as the go between, the mid-level manager, between patriarchy and oppression.

Sarah, just as complacent now, will wage a media war and Twitter beef against an over-sexualized Hagar in the music, television, and film industry, when Hagar dared to point out the fact that black women's efforts are only recognized when they are being exploited in pop culture.

Sarah, still complacent, standing idly by, adopting kids from Africa, doing mission work in every country but America, while Hagar's children are being cut down in the streets, filtered into the cradle to prison pipeline, where they pick overpriced organic vegetables that never make it back to the food deserts from which they came, but definitely make it onto Abraham's dinner table.

At what point are we willing to accept that Sarah's logic was flawed by her acceptance of patriarchy?

When will we acknowledge that the narrative of Sarah's privilege and Hagar's degradation plays out day to day in our society, with Sarah passively allowing the system to rape Hagar, and reap the benefits, while in the same sentence praising God for HIS faithfulness?

Sarah reaping the benefits of privilege, built upon Hagar and her child's suffering. And just when Hagar realizes she has the right to her righteous indignation, it is Sarah, not Abraham who cuts her down at the knees for daring to whisper, “I'm worthy too.”

(Continued on back page.)

Hagar...

How long, Sarah? How long do we continue to let the Narrative play out?

When will the riches of Hagar's womb and the promise of Ishmael be seen as something worth fighting for? When will the prayers of a righteous Sarah transform into action against the powers and principalities that condemn my body, my intellect, my children, and my sexuality? When is the day that my black girl magic isn't seen as a threat to purity, but rather another, splendid image of God's good creation? Pure because of God's love, and Jesus' sacrifice, and not centered around porcelain, man-made definitions of the word?

How much longer, Sarah, until you are strong enough to carry this load with me?

How much longer will it take, Sarah, for you to become my ally?

Shelter...

In another lecture I attended this fall, Jennifer Harvey, author of *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*, outlined the way white Christians failed miserably to respond appropriately to race after 1965 when Black Power came to the fore. Harvey's analysis cleared up something that has puzzled me for years. When I was in seminary in the 1970s, I noticed that some of the white faculty who had been involved in the civil rights movement felt wounded when Black leaders said, "Whitey go home." It seemed as though some of my professors got stuck in that moment. I can now see that much of Mainline Protestantism was stuck as well.

In reviewing fifty years of publications on racism by Mainline Protestants (and some evangelical groups), Harvey found that white faith communities liked to talk about *reconciliation*. But reconciliation is not the most appropriate response. After 500 years of plunder, we need to be talking about repentance and reparations. This reconciliation talk turns out to be like a drug white people can use to feel better. What we need is genuine apology and compensation for those injured.

In the face of all these issues, and the people who live them day in and day out, we at RCWMS are trying to pay attention, to listen, to learn, and to search for just solutions.



Essay Contest

THEME: Essays should focus on the theme "Experiencing White Supremacy." We invite submissions that consider this theme in creative ways. How have your experiences been shaped by being privileged or oppressed by institutional or other forms of racism in our country? How do your intersecting identities affect your faith, values, work, or spiritual practices? How have you addressed or worked to dismantle racism in your family, your religious community, or your city?

DETAILS: Women 18 years of age or older may submit up to 2 nonfiction essays, 1400 words or less. Submit online only: <https://rcwms.submittable.com/submit>. Previous first-place winners and current RCWMS Board members not eligible. No sermons, please. Do not put your name on your essay(s). Fill out the online cover letter form with the essay's title, your name, address, phone, and email. Submissions open October 15, 2015 and close January 15, 2016.

PRIZES: \$300 for first place, \$200 second, and \$100 third. The winning essay will be published in the RCWMS newsletter, *South of the Garden*, March 2016.

NOTIFICATION: Winners will be notified by email.

RCWMS

RCWMS is a thirty-eight-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, and the Triangle Community Foundation.

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