

South of the Garden

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

Volume 36, Number 1

March 2015

Spring

by Jeanette Stokes

We are pleased to announce the winners of the 2015 RCWMS Essay Contest. First place goes to Rebecca Lanning of Durham, NC, for her essay, "How to Pet a Porcupine," which appears in this newsletter. Second place goes to Sarah Woodford of New Haven, CT, and third place goes to Lauren Kilbourn of Chapel Hill, NC. The theme was "Embodying Faith." An honorable mention goes to Lucille Gaither of Cheverly, MD. Many thanks to this year's judges: Marcy Litle, Jocelyn Streid, and Rebecca Welper. The judges report that they were touched by the thoughtful honesty and inspired by the great variety of this year's submissions. We send our thanks to all who entered our contest!

We are excited to announce the opening of our next art exhibition. MASKS & MIRRORS: *Works by Mary Jane Rivers & Friends* opens at Cassilhaus, in Chapel Hill, NC on March 15 and will remain open until April 19. Mary Jane Rivers' abstract forms reflect a vibrant conversation between the conscious and unconscious. Her paintings portray the dialogue between the masks we present to the world and the vulnerabilities that peek out from behind those masks. The works are mirrors of an interior landscape. This exhibition features a selection of her work, along with pieces by fellow artists Bryant Holsenbeck and Marcy Litle.

MASKS & MIRRORS is a SWAN Day event (Support Women Artists Now Day) and will include regular gallery hours: Thursdays, 12:00-5:00 pm (except Thursday, April 9. That week it will be open Wednesday, April 8). Special activities will include:
3/15 Opening, Sunday, 3-5 pm
3/19 Evening of Song with Randa McNamara, Thursday, 7-9 pm
4/2 Women's Voices: Readings by Local Writers, Thursday, 7-9 pm
4/8 Artist Talk, Wednesday, 7-9 pm
4/19 Music: Alison Weiner & Mary Capucilli, 3-5 pm
RSVPs are required for all the events. To respond, go to: bit.ly/MasksMirrors.

In March, we will offer our annual writing workshop with Carol Henderson. MOMENTS MAGNIFIED: *Writing Short, Writing Strong* will be March 20-21, 2015. When I attend I get more writing done than in almost any other setting all year.

A favorite event of mine is coming up in March. RCWMS will offer A TRADITIONAL JAPANESE TEA GATHERING at the beautiful Japanese Teahouse at the Sarah P. Duke Gardens in Durham, NC, Friday March 27, 2015 at 1:00 pm. Guests sit on tatami mats on the floor or in chairs and wait for the host to slide the soji screen door open and bring in sweets and the implements for making tea. I like listening to the sound of hot water being poured into a bowl, and then watching it whisked into a green frothy tea for us to drink together. For more info, see CALENDAR.



Porcupine

Note: Rebecca Lanning's essay "How to Pet a Porcupine" won first place in the RCWMS Essay Contest this year.

by Rebecca Lanning

The dogs' nails need clipping. I hear the click of their paws on the hardwoods before I even get out of bed. They are siblings. Thirteen years old next month. Teenagers. Except in human years they are ninety six.

Instead of rolling out of bed, I roll in, kiss my husband's forehead. He had a bad headache last night. He's been working long hours out of town on a demanding job, and he's home for two brief days, so I let him sleep in while I tend to the pets and our younger son, a high school junior.

When I let the dogs out, they walk, stiff-legged, down the deck steps to the woods. Afterward, they sit at the foot of the steps and stare up at me, imploringly. "You can do it!" I cheer from the back door, and they muster the strength to climb the steps. Soon we will need to build them a ramp. Abby, the female, has a lipoma the size of a grapefruit behind her right shoulder. Chief has a tumor near his adrenal gland. After they eat and take their meds, Chief goes on a barking rant. He's agitated. I lie on the bare floor, and he joins me. I check his gums, like the Vet instructed, to make sure he's not bleeding internally. I rub his face. His dark, glassy eyes have a faraway look.

I cleaned up the kitchen last night before I went to bed, but now I see there's a pan out and a plate. Our older son, who's twenty, went to a late movie and must have made himself something to eat when he got home. He should be in college or working, but he lost momentum after high school. Like a tire with a slow leak. Like the dogs, paralyzed at the foot of the steps.

For years, he has struggled with a learning disability, anxiety, fatigue. Two weeks ago we learned that he is autistic. He has Asperger's. "When did you first think your son might be on the spectrum?" the psychologist, who looked like a fashion model, asked.

"When he was in second grade!" I shouted. "Fourteen years ago!" My fists flew in the air like I was punching at ghosts. Five different doctors said my son couldn't be autistic. He makes eye contact. He gets high-brow humor. He doesn't flap his hands, walk on his toes, talk incessantly about train schedules.

He's the smartest person I know, but he can't get any traction. "You can do it!" I want to shout, but he's mad at me. He's mad at everyone. Last night, while I was making dinner, the smell of onions made him sick. Before he escaped to his room, he turned to me and said, "I wish I had a different family."

(Continued on inside.)

Calendar

*March 2, 2015, Monday, 6:00 pm

WOMEN IN MEDIA

von der Heyden Pavilion, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC

Join the Sallie Bingham Center for an evening with journalist Judy Woodruff, Camille Jackson, and Jean Fox O'Barr.

Contact: 919-660-5967

*March 8, 2015, Sunday, 2:00–5:00 pm

The 4th Annual ALICE FEST

Full Frame Theater, downtown Durham, NC

Tickets are free but reservations are required.

RSVP: infoAliceFest@gmail.com

*March 10, 2015, Tuesday, 11:30 am–2:00 pm

ART OF CONSCIOUS AGING

Colony Hills Clubhouse, 3060 Colony Rd, Durham, NC

Bring a bag lunch. Newcomers welcome.

No fee to attend. No need to register.

*March 17, 2015

LABYRINTH WALK AT DUKE CHAPEL

Duke Chapel, Duke University, Durham, NC

Walk the RCWMS Labyrinth. Please wear clean socks.

Free & open to the public.

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

*March 15–April 19, 2015

MASKS & MIRRORS: Works by Mary Jane Rivers & Friends

Cassilhaus, Chapel Hill, NC

Mary Jane Rivers' abstract forms reflect a vibrant conversation between the conscious and unconscious.

Her paintings portray the dialogue between the masks we present to the world and the vulnerabilities that peek out from behind those masks. The works are mirrors of an interior landscape. This exhibition features a selection of her work, along with pieces by fellow artists Bryant Holsenbeck and Marcy Litle, and is complemented by local women's voices in word and song. This is a SWAN Day event (Support Women Artists Now Day).

Gallery open: most Thursdays, 12:00–5:00 pm (Except Wed., April 8 instead of Thurs. April 9.)

EVENTS

3/15 Opening, Sunday, 3–5 pm

3/19 Evening of Song with Randa McNamara, 7–9 pm

4/2 Women's Voices: Readings by Local Writers

Thursday, 7–9 pm

4/8 Artist Talk, Wednesday, 7–9 pm

4/19 Music: Alison Weiner & Mary Capucilli, 3–5 pm

Sponsors: RCWMS and Cassilhaus cassilhaus.com

RSVP at least a day before event: bit.ly/MasksMirrors

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

*March 20–21, 2015, Fri. 7–9 pm & Sat. 9:30 am–3:30 pm

MOMENTS MAGNIFIED: Writing Short, Writing Strong—A Writing Workshop with Carol Henderson

Durham, NC

In this workshop we will select fragments from our lives or our imaginations and create powerful vignettes, which we will string into a necklace of related narrative pearls. We will focus on several aspects of craft: a strong narrative persona, tight thematic control, effective use of reflection, and powerful endings. Come prepared to think and write a lot. For women writers in all genres and levels.

Cost: \$125.

Register: bit.ly/1kQve4Z

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



*March 27, 2015, Friday, 1:00 pm

A TRADITIONAL JAPANESE TEA GATHERING

Sarah P. Duke Gardens, Durham, NC

Join RCWMS for a traditional Japanese Tea Gathering.

Enjoy the calm simplicity of the tearoom and the natural beauty of the gardens. This will be a small group.

Leader: Chizuko Sueyoshi

Cost: \$25.

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

*March 29–April 3, 2015

ECUMENICAL HOLY WEEK LABYRINTH WALK

Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, NC

Sponsors: Several Chapel Hill churches

Free and open to the public. Please wear clean socks.

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

*April 13–May 18, 2015, Mondays, 6:30–8:30 pm

WRITING FOR OUR LIVES: A Prompt Writing

Workshop

Carolina Pointe II, 6011 Farrington Rd, Chapel Hill, NC

If you are grieving the loss of a loved one, you know how isolating and lonely grief can feel. Social support can facilitate healthy grieving and encourage shifts in perspective. Join us and take time to remember, to get your thoughts down, to reflect through writing, and to share with others. We will use prompts to tap into our creative expression and begin to gently explore feelings that silence or limit us, so that we may move forward freely.

Leader: Heidi Gessner is an ordained UCC Minister and UNC Hospitals Bereavement Coordinator and Palliative Care Chaplain

Cost: \$150

Contact: Heidi, heidigessner@gmail.com, 919-357-4148

*April 17–18, 2015, Fri. 7–9 pm & Sat. 9:30 am–4:00 pm

MOTHER MAY I? A Narrative Leadership Workshop

Durham, NC

Despite the growing number of female role models available to us today, for most women, our first example of female authority and leadership was provided by our mothers or primary female caretakers. This workshop provides participants a chance to explore who they are and who they have become as leaders in their own fields through the lens of what they learned from their mothers about being a "woman in charge." This highly participatory workshop will invite you to enter the story of your relationship with your mother from several angles and there identify insights and applications for leading your life and work today.

Leader: Jan Gregory-Charpentier, an ordained United Church of Christ minister, is a pastor and teacher, retreat leader, ministry supervisor, and a daughter.

Cost: \$75. Register: www.rcwms.org/calendar.html

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

*May 3–10, 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

*July 6–9, 2015

2015 YOUNG CLERGY WOMEN PROJECT SUMMER CONFERENCE

Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Future Weeks of Quiet & Writing:

September 20–27, 2015

January 1–8, 2016

Porcupine...

"I know, honey," I said. "I know." He thinks if he belonged to a different family, he would have a different life. Even the most ordinary day sucks all his energy. There's so much to process. Like running a marathon and doing taxes. At the same time.

Now, when my younger son comes downstairs, I have his breakfast ready. I just want to watch him eat, but I irritate him too. He doesn't want to talk to me. He sits at the bar in the kitchen and studies for a test while I pack his lunch. He's so good, I worry that he might be afraid to let us down. He's smart and handsome and athletic, but he can't seem to enjoy his gifts or his life. I worry that he doesn't want to leave his big brother behind. He's so silent sometimes. I want to drive him to school, but he drives himself now. I stand at the living room window and watch him back down the driveway in our old Prius. Through the long, low, oak branches, I watch until the car rounds the corner and disappears.

Now my husband is awake, drinking coffee. We talk about what to make for dinner tonight, a check that hasn't arrived, a spat he had with his sister. I want to walk the dogs with him, but I am picking up an old friend from the Cancer Center where she's having her bi-weekly chemo treatment. I was in her wedding thirty-some years ago, and we have reconnected since her diagnosis. Her husband drops her off for treatment, and I pick her up. Some days we go to lunch before I drive her home. Her long, brown hair fell out; now it's short and silver, and she wears purple and the most beautiful, beaded bracelets that shimmer in the sun. In the car, on the way to her house, we talk about how much time we've wasted listening to the wrong people, beating ourselves up. We admire the clouds. We share poems through email. She just sent me one by Jeff Foster called *Two by Two*, about building an ark deep in our hearts, and letting everything in: "

Doubt and certainty, joy and sorrow...

Let each pair of opposites find sanctuary in your non-dual vastness.

Sail towards a gentler world.

When I get home, my husband has left me a note. He's gone to the Aquatic Center to swim laps. Our older son is still upstairs, still sleeping. He sleeps when we're awake, awakens when we sleep. He's become nocturnal to avoid us, our probing stares and wringing hands, our onions, our genes. I pet the dogs, give them treats, let them out. It's warmer today than I thought it would be, so I sit outside in the green Adirondack chair, the dogs at my feet. I close my eyes and feel my back against the chair, the sun on my face.

I sense a snarl in my stomach, a tangled chain in my chest. I say to myself, "Something in me is anxious." Instead of turning away from that part of me or trying to dismiss or fix it, I say "Hello" to it. Gently, I put a hand on my chest. Today, a curious image comes, a porcupine gnawing on a stick. I smile, seeing myself in the porcupine, bristly, perseverating, worried about the dogs, my children, my friend. I ask, "Porcupine, how do you want me to be with you?" It wants to be petted, but I wonder: how do you pet a porcupine without getting your fingers skewered?

(Continued on this page.)



A breeze brushes by, and then suddenly, in my mind's eye, the porcupine drops the stick and rolls over, exposing its soft, bare belly. It's the simplest gesture, but inside my chest, all through my hard, tense body, I experience the sweetest release, a flood of grace. It's as if I am bearing the weight of the world and then, suddenly, I contain it.

Later, as I give the dogs their fish oil, start dinner, watch—out the corner of my eye—my younger son do his homework, I feel lighter. I realize how good it feels to step back, drop the stick—the nervous gnawing—and open myself to the frightened, tender place inside.

I'm chopping carrots at the counter when I notice the sun set behind the tree line in the back yard. I set the knife down, open the back door, behold the swirls of peach and gold against the shadowy spike of trees. I breathe in the falling darkness.

When I step out onto the deck, the dogs follow me, their nails clicking against the planks. For a moment, they are like puppies again, snapping and wagging, and I am aglow in the light of porcupine, the wonder of its belly and its barbs.

Rebecca Lanning is a Durham-based freelance writer. Her essays have appeared in Brain, Child Magazine, The Washington Post, and elsewhere.

Foremothers

RCWMS has been working on a couple of projects that will preserve the stories of our foremothers. We hope that these women's lives will inspire future generations to work on behalf of love and justice.

RCWMS intern Jocelyn Streid has been working on a biography about the Rev. Helen Crotwell. Helen was a founding mother of the Resource Center, serving on the original board of trustees. A Georgia native, Helen was ordained as a minister in the United Methodist Church in 1973. As Assistant Chaplain to Duke University from 1973 to 1978, she facilitated student activism in the civil rights movement. She later served as UMC District Superintendent of Fayetteville, NC, and was the first woman to run for Bishop in the UMC Southeastern Jurisdiction.

Our intern Molly Williams has been working on a brief biography about Sr. Evelyn Mattern, a native of Philadelphia. Sister Evelyn was a Catholic nun who worked for social justice in North Carolina, focusing on a myriad of issues, including farmworker's rights, gender equality, and environmental activism. She was known and regarded for her life of prayer, contemplation, activism, and protest. Additionally, Sister Evelyn authored books on women mystics, the beatitudes, and the lives of women in ministry.

Along with providing information about these two inspiring women on our website, we will also create Wikipedia entries for each of them. We will be attending the "Women at Duke Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon" on the 25th of March. This workshop is part of a worldwide movement to increase the number of women-focused articles on Wikipedia.

Jim Crow

Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2010.

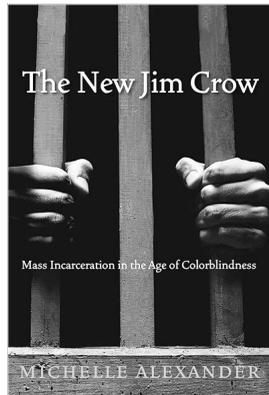
Last fall, a small group of women at RCWMS read *The New Jim Crow* together over several weeks. This was after the shooting of Michael Brown, before decisions by grand juries not to indict the police officer who killed him, nor the officer responsible for the death of Eric Garner. The book, which came out in 2010, offers a powerful challenge to conventional wisdom about the current state of race and civil rights. Since then the ACLU has taken up the cause of mass incarceration and states have begun to reconsider their harsh and unequally administered marijuana laws. Since then many thousands of Americans have become more active in the struggle against racism in our society. For our intergenerational group of white women the book was a revelation, a powerful and persuasive indictment of the persistence of the systemic racial bias that is still woven into the fabric of our country.

Alexander does not provide answers, though she does provide a few suggestions about how we can move toward justice. She gives a clear exposition of her argument about the widespread and, for those who do not live it, often hidden impact of the tidal wave of mass incarceration that has overtaken our country since the 1980s. This argument is most clearly laid out in the book's opening and closing chapters. In between she provides a concise history of the three historical phases of systemic racial oppression—slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration—and how they are linked. The heart of the book is a detailed, and thoroughly documented, account of the way the current system works to create a stigmatized underclass. In the end, she calls on us to undertake the struggle to see all people as completely human, even those who have been branded "criminal." At the same time, she argues that we must do this while also overcoming our collective unwillingness to acknowledge race, and our assumptions that racism has somehow been overcome.

This is the most eye-opening book that I've read in a long time. I urge you to read it.

Marcy Litle retired from teaching international studies at Duke in 2012. She likes to paint, read, help people polish their prose, and hang out with her granddaughters. She volunteers with RCWMS and serves on the RCWMS board of trustees.

Note: Please visit *Words & Spirit*, the RCWMS site for more reviews of books and media:
wordsandspirit.tumblr.com/



News

We would like to draw your attention to some new features on our website.

In between newsletters, you can keep up-to-date with RCWMS by reading our NEWS BLOG at www.rcwms.org/blog. So far, this year's posts include a report on the first session of our BEFRIENDING DEATH series and a behind-the-scenes look at the 2015 RCWMS essay contest. We'd love to get your comments about what we've been up to. Feel free to email us at meghanrcwms@gmail.com.

Visit www.wordsandspirit.tumblr.com for new resources on our WORDS & SPIRIT book and media blog. This conversational blog offers our recommendations on books we've read and films we've liked. You can read a review of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander, which is reprinted on this page of the newsletter. On the blog, you can find our recent reviews of *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine and *Imaging My Inner Fire: Finding My Path Through Creating Art* by Martha Jane Petersen.

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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