

South of the Garden

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

Volume 27, Number 3

November, 2006

Gleaning

by Jeanette Stokes

A 75-year-old pecan tree shades my backyard, house, and part of the park next door. Most years, after the weather turns cold, the pecans begin to fall. Last year produced such a good crop that I had nuts raining on the house and carpeting the ground. I had to watch my step as I walked from the house to the garage, even though I cleared the path almost every day.

On cold fall mornings, I often see elderly people looking for nuts in the park next door. I figure that the nuts that fall in my backyard belong to me and the ones that land in the park belong to anyone who wants to pick them up. Last year there were plenty for everyone. I shelled them, ate them, gave them away, and even put a few in the park to ensure that everyone would have some to pick up.

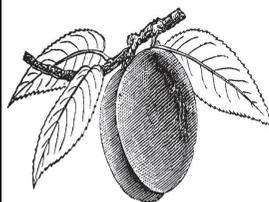
This summer, I spent several weeks in Santa Fe, New Mexico looking after my friend Martha's house and dog. On one of my first walks around the neighborhood with Greta the dog, I noticed apricot trees that were dropping their fruit in the street. At first I stepped over the fallen fruit, but then gave myself permission to pick some up, hoping that the tree owners felt about their yield the way I do about my pecans.

Back in my borrowed kitchen, I admired the small ovals, red on one side and a rosy yellow on the other, and wondered if they were safe to eat. Their only flaw was that they were slightly squished on one side from falling on the pavement. I long ago stopped demanding perfect fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables never used to look perfect, and I figured ten apricots smashed on one side were equal to five whole ones. Still, I found myself wondering whether there was such a thing as an ornamental poisonous apricot that would rot my stomach from the inside out.

I was startled to realize that I am totally dependant on grocery stores and farmer's markets to figure out what is edible. I am several generations removed from the land. Some of my grandparents and great grandparents would have known immediately what to make of the lovely found apricots.

In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan explores the history and politics of eating as he follows four American meals from field and forest to the table. In it he points out how ignorant we have become in this country. Many of us are poorly equipped to make sensible choices about what to eat. We have lost track of some of the wisdom of our various cultures—things like eating wasabi with raw fish to kill parasites or horseradish with pork for the same reason. If we don't pay attention we are liable to eat meal after meal that is mostly high fructose corn syrup.

I ate the apricots this summer and nothing bad happened. They were, in fact, delicious, especially after I cut off the squished side. I also bought some at the farmer's market in Santa Fe, but I liked the ones I picked up off the ground even better. They seemed special in some way, like an unexpected gift. It made me wonder what other gifts I am offered each day that I step right over or simply fail to notice.



Sue

by Jeanette Stokes

I gave the following remarks on September 16, 2006 at a memorial service for Sue Versenyi. Sue lived in Carrboro, wrote and taught, and attended two of our Writing Weeks at the beach in 2005. She died of breast cancer on August 30, 2006. She was 49 years old. Gifts from Sue's friends and family will help RCWMS to publish a volume of her poetry next year.

Sue Versenyi never agreed to die. She did not want to die. She wanted to live to see her children grow up. She wanted to watch her garden bloom summer after summer. She wanted to write more poems, make more quilts, and teach more children to read and write. She didn't want to die, and so for days, and then weeks, she simply refused to do so.

Sue was strong, kind, warm, loving, creative, generous, and hospitable. She was a mother who poured her heart and energy into the care and guiding of her daughters. She and Adam created a home in which the life of the family was central. They shared meals and conversations around the table; they celebrated birthdays and a variety of religious and cultural traditions; they welcomed friends and strangers. Sue and Adam built a life that could be the envy of many and, by God, Sue did not want to leave it.

The last time I was with Sue, while she was fully communicative, was one night in early August at the hospital after she had broken her leg. She would probably be dead in two weeks. (Proved that one wrong, as per usual.) Another doctor suggested there was more that could be done. She was in a lot of pain, and it had been a particularly stressful day. But in came the girls with new purchases from Look Out and from Old Navy to show their mother, and the hospital room became a fashion show. We all laughed and talked and commented on the color and texture of the clothes meant for school a few weeks later. Sue was ready for lots more years of that.

Sue surprised us all. She kept breathing past her wedding anniversary, past the first day of school, twelve days past the day when the Hospice nurses announced she would certainly die that day. She kept breathing past my trip to Indiana, past Margie's weeklong trip to Seattle, clear into the holy woman Mother Meera's visit to North Carolina. No one understood why her body kept on. We may never understand.

When I wrote to a friend who is a Hospice chaplain to express my wonder at her living so long beyond all predictions and to describe the mix of anxiety and impatience that many of us felt, he asked, "On whose schedule is she doing her dying?" Sue and her Creator were right on time, he assured me, and they were up to something that would probably only baffle the rest of us.

Watching Sue breathe on one of those last afternoons, I felt like I was watching a newborn with respiratory problems. With such a child, I might wonder why the tiny person bothered to make the effort. That is certainly what I wondered with Sue. It looked like such a painful struggle. I wondered, as others had, why she didn't seem to want to give up.

(Continued on back.)

Calendar

November 15, 2006, 7:00 pm

ART & THE FEMININE DIVINE: Gallery Discussion
Long View Gallery, East Hargett St., Raleigh, NC
Meet artists in the exhibit which presents the many forms and faces of God the Mother, Lover, and Creatrix. Originally organized by the Resource Center for Women & Ministry in the South. For more: www.rcwms.org
On display through Nov. 18 (Thurs.–Sat. 11 am–3 pm)
Contact: 919-828-6500, info@thecollectorsgallery.com

November 18, 2006, 10:00 am–4:00 pm

PRAYING WITH IMAGES: In the Lap of the Great Mother
Ghost Ranch Santa Fe, 401 Old Taos Hwy., Santa Fe, NC
This retreat will provide an opportunity to reflect upon mythological and archetypal imagery, do creative artwork under the encouragement of the artist, and to participate in ritual.
Leader: Meinrad Craighead, visionary artist
Cost: \$80 (3 people can register together for \$70 each)
Contact: Laurie Leitch, 505-992-1105

December 1–3, 2006

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE: A Silent Retreat for Women
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
Come to the ocean for some quiet before the busy holiday season swamps you. Enjoy a time of being quietly present with your own soul. Will include periods of gathered silence as well as plenty of time on your own to walk, rest, and read.
Leader: Jeanette Stokes
Cost: \$275 single, \$235 double, includes room and meals
Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

December 5, 2006, 7:00 pm

STORIES AND STILLNESS: AN ADVENT REFLECTION
Durham Friends Meeting, 404 Alexander Ave., Durham, NC
Together we will walk the Advent journey of scripture by retelling the stories that correspond to the four weeks that lead up to Christmas. Join us for an evening of stillness, centering, and personal reflection before the season carries you away.
Leaders: Candice Ryals and Jeanette Stokes
Cost: \$5, suggested donation
Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

December 17, 2006, 7:00 pm

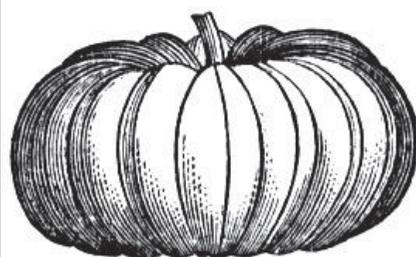
INTERFAITH CELEBRATION of COMMUNITY, SPIRIT, and CHANGE
Beth El Synagogue, 1004 Watts St., Durham, NC
All are welcome. Bring a candle and, if it's easy, a folding chair or cushion to sit on.
Sponsors: RCWMS and stone circles
Cost: \$5, suggested donation
Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

January 5–12, 2007

A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING FOR WOMEN
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
RCWMS has reserved Pelican House, the retreat house on the beach at Trinity Center, for an unstructured week of writing for women. Come for all or part of this week.
Cost: \$625, includes room and meals
Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

January 27–29, 2007

WOMEN'S PREACHING ACADEMY
Auburn Seminary, New York, NY
Theme: Preaching Leadership in Lent and Beyond—Text, Sermon, and Leadership for Ministry
Co-Facilitators: Jacqueline Lewis, Middle Collegiate Church; and Donna Schaper, Judson Memorial Church
Explore and practice ways to enhance your voice, and your church's mission, for ministry in and for the world.
Program fee: \$225
Contact: 212-662-4315, email cjm@auburnsem.org



February 16–17, 2007

SACRED CIRCLES: A Celebration of Women's Spirituality
The National Cathedral, Washington, DC
Leaders: Roberta Bondi, Esther deWaal, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and more
Contact: 202-537-2221, www.cathedral.org, cathedralcollege@cathedral.org.

March 8, 2007

WOMEN'S LABYRINTH WALK & POTLUCK
Groce UMC, Asheville, NC
Walks at 4:30 & 7:00 pm, potluck at 6:00 pm
Leader: Jeanette Stokes
Sponsor: Holy Ground
Cost: \$15
Contact: Holy Ground, 828-236-0222, www.holygroundretreats.org

March 29–April 1, 2007

WOMEN OVER 60 RETREAT
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
We are not just an older version of ourselves, we are moving towards wholeness. Journal writing, simple art projects, silence, and sacred conversation will aid us as we discern our own paths, become our own guides, and face the unmapped territory of our elder years.
Leaders: Anita McLeod & Margie Hattori
Cost: \$375 single, \$350 double
Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

April 29–May 6, 2007

A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING FOR WOMEN
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
RCWMS has reserved Pelican House, the retreat house on the beach at Trinity Center, for an unstructured week of writing for women. Please come for the whole week.
Cost: \$625, includes room and meals
Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

May 14–26, 2007

LABYRINTH PROGRAMS AT CHARTRES CATHEDRAL
Chartres, France
May 14–19, Walking a Sacred Path with Marion Woodman, "Virgin, Mother, Crone"
May 19–20, School of the Sacred Feminine
May 21–26, Walking a Sacred Path with Lauren Artress, "Revelations of Divine Love, Julian of Norwich"
Contact: Veriditas, 415-561-2921, contact@Veriditas.net, www.Veriditas.net

June 8–10, 2007

WRITING WORKSHOP AT THE BEACH
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
Leader: Elaine Neil Orr
Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

Sept 13–16, 2007

MEDITATION RETREAT WITH THERESE FITZGERALD
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
Leader: Therese Fitzgerald, meditation teacher in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh
Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

September 23–30, 2007

A WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING FOR WOMEN
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
RCWMS has reserved Pelican House, the retreat house on the beach at Trinity Center, for an unstructured week of writing for women. Please come for the whole week.
Cost: \$625, includes room and meals
Sponsor/contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, www.rcwms.org

Revitalization

Becky Holtzman of Albuquerque, NM won third place in the 2005 RCWMS Essay Contest. Her winning essay, Revitalization, is printed below. The Essay Contest is made possible by a grant from the Clifford A. and Lillian C. Peeler Family Foundation.

The iris bulbs are pushing themselves up out of the ground, thick and knobby; they are ready to be divided again. I've already started the task, digging out the invasive grass that's grown in around the bulbs, gently breaking and prying them up, laying the unearthed roots into freshly dug tunnels. I'm also planting at the art center where I work, where the front yard is a field of weeds or dirt, depending on the last rain. There's a multi-year landscaping plan for the future, but we need some small things to tide us over, leaves pushing out, to remind us of our potential. I want to see some green next spring, as I walk up the sidewalk on weekday mornings, in this city that's half desert, half river.

I live and work in a neighborhood that is in the process of being revitalized. I have lived in this area for seven years—ever since I left the “safer” part of town, where the only apartment I could afford happened to have crack-selling neighbors next door. They stole my Christmas packages the first year I lived in this city, but that's a different story. I am now blessed to have a job that is blocks from my home; I can ride my bike to most of my needs, my brother's house and the river, a muddy stretch of low water running through arid desert. This part of town is old, and my small house was purchased five years ago, with my family's help. Across the street lives a woman whose aunt inhabited my house for thirty years, which I find rather comforting. With my (now) husband, I gutted and remodeled the detached garage of our 84-year-old house into a studio; it took two years and enormous effort. The studio is like a tiny church, with its pitched roof and generous light, and I feel calmed within its bright walls. Sometimes I call it the Satellite; I spin in the space just beyond our house, an outpost for my solitude. The small building opens into the garden, where I roam for distraction in warmer months. In winter I retreat and doodle garden plans for the next year.

The quality of my life is good. Not so for everyone in this area, or in the state, which is economically downtrodden. Lately, with revitalization, things in the neighborhood are looking better. I do mean looking better, because the town homes and new houses, built on the lots where old houses used to be, do look lovely—but their price tags are driving out the folks that have kept this neighborhood going while it was pretty rocky—a good thirty-plus years. Traffic is already worsening on the tiny two-lane road that wanders along the north side of this neighborhood; it's lucky I can bike the side streets, amongst funky old houses and big trees and friendly people who recognize me because of my daily trek to work. I grew up in the suburbs of Louisville and Chicago, and I'm still surprised to recognize so many people in this mid-sized city of a half-million.

I work at a community art center that was built in 1925; a Methodist girls' boarding school, it went out of operation in the mid-70s, and was mostly abandoned until the early '90s, when it was purchased by a Montessori school and turned into an art center. There are gallery spaces, studios for rent, art classes for adults and kids, a small theater, a dance floor. It is an amazing building; sometimes alumnae visit, and their eyes tear up with memories sweet or sad, depending on the girls they once were, the women they are now. Their stories are marvelous, and every one of them comments that these old floors used to be spotless—and then they shake their heads, tiny miniscule movements that convey a



clicking tongue, even if they're too polite to actually chastise. The church that used to run the girls' school is kitty corner to the art center.

It feels miraculous that I have crafted a life that mostly fulfills my ideals, where a car is not really necessary. For three years, I commuted across town to a job as a flower designer. I spent nearly an hour a day—insignificant, by most commuting standards—in my car, and I usually arrived home tired and cranky. Flower designing is not easy work, though it has romantic appeal to those who've never worked a Valentine's Day, 5:00 am to 9:00 pm, roses roses roses and ten thorns for each bloom. When I decided it was time to move on, I had nothing lined up; I saved money for a brief employment-hiatus and I jumped, despite the cozy, inhibitive fears in my heart. I asked the universe for a job I could bicycle to. I gave myself one month to focus on art making—I had a show coming up—and two months later I biked to an interview for my current job.

I learned everything I know about faith in that leap. I grew a new heart, one with peculiar luminescent wings, when I tossed that fright-filled ticker into the unknown yawning under me. The unexpected benefit was that I began to truly reside in my neighborhood, not just by working in it, but by experiencing it in new ways; the less I used my car, the less I wanted to use it. At night I dreamed of archaeological discoveries, found only because I was traveling bicycle-slow on old highways. The history of my neighborhood, the houses, the girls' school, the trees and the people, became visible in ways that they hadn't been from my truck.

The autumn after I switched jobs, a friend divided her iris bulbs and gave me a boxful. I dug a trench in the clayey soil along the south side of the house, and tucked my bulbs in on a cold October afternoon. My family never really gardened, and I'm continually amazed at how satisfying it is to put things in the ground, and watch them come up (or not, depending on the mysteries of earth, sun, moisture). I figured the bulbs would send out leaves in the spring, but my ancient gardening book said I couldn't expect blooms until the following year. Eighteen months was the far-flung future, at that point in my life.

Six months later, the irises sent out green machete-blade leaves, and then bloomed like mad: pale blue, lavender, white and golden yellow. I was giddy with joy, and those huge blooms came to represent everything that startles me in life: finding a job I care deeply about, my decision to marry my husband, and the new directions my work has taken through recent collaborations with poets, something I would not have predicted five years ago. Anything that is unexpected, or beautiful, recall those iris to me. And each April, the tall blooms remind me to be on the lookout for the unbelievable.

We've got a new neighbor to the south; she has done some major work before even moving in, making the house her own. While preparing to welcome her, I'm also attempting to make peace with my tough neighbor, the guy who periodically complains about my low-hanging trees, but who also warned me about the peeping tom lurking in the alley. I look forward to no longer being the newest household on the block, freshly scrubbed 608 pleasantly juxtaposed next to my dusty, lived-in 612. I feel established, digging out the iris, and I think I'll take a boxful over when the new woman moves in. I want to encourage my neighborhood's gentle growth; I want us, in our old houses with crooked foundations, to practice the resurrection that Wendell Berry writes of, earthy, slow, and enduring, not the fast-paced up-sweep of gentrification.

(Continued on back.)

Revitalize...

Neighborhoods have cycles, like seasons, plant life, and the moon; growth and loss are reflected in our daily lives. As we move through the continuum of our downtown neighborhood, we find comfort in old houses, and welcome newcomers. Just about anyone who knows the wisdom of embracing change and cherishing old ladies will fit right in. And I don't think I'd want to transplant my cranky neighbor, even if he's groaning and restless like an iris bulb that has outgrown its bed. Resurrection takes practice and patience.

Becky Holtzman received a BFA in Printmaking from Indiana University in 1996, moved to Albuquerque in 1997, and has worked steadily as an artist while holding down many a day job. Most recently she has worked for the Harwood Art Center where she co-edited the Harwood Anthology, an anthology of New Mexico poets. As of August 2006, she is working fulltime as an artist.

Essay Contest

The Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South is sponsoring its third essay contest. Women eighteen years of age and older may submit previously unpublished nonfiction essays of 1400 words or less.

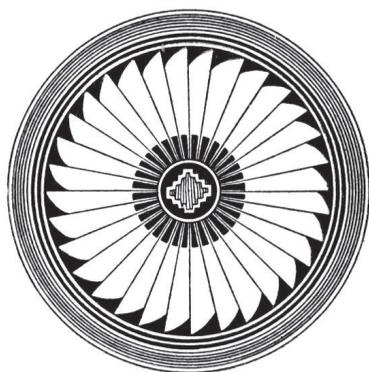
Essays should focus on or exemplify feminist perspectives on spirituality and daily life. We want women to write about their lives, grace, how they experience God, or how they make it through the hard places. No sermons, please.

Prizes will be \$500 for first place, \$300 for second place, and \$200 for third place. The winning essay will be published in the RCWMS newsletter, *South of the Garden*, in March 2007. Winners will be notified by mail.

The limit is two essays per person. Submit four double-spaced copies of each essay. Do not put your name on the essay. Attach a cover letter with the title of the essay(s), your name, address, phone number, and email. Submissions must be postmarked by December 15, 2006. No email submissions are permitted. Manuscripts will not be returned. Mail submissions to:

RCWMS Essay Contest
1202 Watts Street
Durham, NC 27701

This essay contest is made possible in part by a grant from the Clifford A. and Lillian C. Peeler Family Foundation.



Sue...

Give up? What are you, nuts? Sue? Give up? She clung to life, not in a fearful way, but in her own strong-willed, tenacious, insistent, stubborn, opinionated way. If ever I met a woman I wanted to be on MY side, it was Sue. Watching her, I was awed by the strength of the life force, and awed by Sue.

For weeks, she remained among us, living, even in what most of us thought was a pretty meager imitation of life, but living none the less, because it was what she wanted most to do. We should all be so lucky as to have a mother or a love or a sister or a friend who would fight SO hard to be with us. She loved us, one and all. And we loved her. She will live on, in our hearts, always.

So might it be.

RCWMS

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Note

There will only be three issues of *South of the Garden* in 2006, Volume 27, Numbers 1-3. There will be no Vol. 27, No.4. The next issue will be Volume 28, Number 1 and will be published in the first quarter of 2007.



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