

South of the Garden

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

Volume 35, Number 1

March 2014

Tumbling

by Liz Dowling-Sendor

Note: Liz Dowling-Sendor's essay "Like a Tumbling Stream" won first place in our essay contest this year. The contest theme was inter-generational relationships among women.

Two mornings a week, like clockwork, she would appear in a long fluttering skirt. Caroline was a college senior. She was not just pretty but screen-star glamorous, with wavy auburn hair to her elbows and a manner of moving her slim hips that reminded me of a mountain stream. She brought the kind of energy for my children that now lagged in me. I'd slip upstairs to work and from below I'd hear laughter, sounds of playing. Sometimes aromas would curl up—fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy. At dinner I'd hunch exhausted over my plate, sensing the fat and starch Caroline had provided translating inside me into nourishment, care, love.

The nourishment soon became two-way. Caroline would linger after I came downstairs. We'd sit at the kitchen table. She'd talk in her windy voice about her latest boyfriend, her mother, her yearning for the long-ago father who died in Vietnam. She remembered him only as a shadowy figure standing in a doorway while sharp words ricocheted from him to her mother.

Her father's death meant Caroline grew up as the only child in a female home. And this meant Caroline had learned to do everything that needed doing. She installed a ceiling fan in our bedroom, sewed couch cushions, fixed faucets, painted our dining room cobalt blue. She encouraged me to get a kitten for the kids, then when he arrived she spent hours removing fleas from his fur. Once when I lost the house key, Caroline shimmied up outside to the second floor, balanced on a two-inch-wide ledge to open the window, and soon was letting me in the front door.

After college Caroline and some friends decided to open a restaurant. She took the kids with her to buy cement and paint, piling them into a cart and wheeling them around like they were on an amusement-park ride. At the vacant building downtown they watched her pour the restaurant's concrete floor and lay tile and plaster the walls. The place opened to rave reviews, notably for the wine list Caroline created.

Eventually Caroline married Andy, who was gentle and funny and who (most importantly) loved Caroline. They moved to the mountains and had two sons and seemed to have found the inside track to happily-ever-after. Whenever I visited, Caroline would put on a gourmet meal even as she tended to her little boys. I often wondered: Was there anything Caroline couldn't do?

I learned the answer much sooner than expected.

"Oh God, Caroline. Cervical cancer? Stage four?"

(Continued on inside.)

Blue Ink

by Jeanette Stokes

I started writing *morning pages* in a paper journal over twenty years ago. I soon discovered that my hand got tired if I used a conventional ballpoint pen. The simple effort it takes to press the pen against the paper for twenty to thirty minutes made my right hand ache. I learned from Natalie Goldberg (*Writing Down the Bones*) that it would make the writing go better if I used a pen that the ink flowed out of with only the slightest pressure on the page. Flair pens, magic markers, roller balls, and fountain pens all met the criteria for ease of writing, but since the first three were disposable and would quickly wind up in the landfill, I set out to learn about fountain pens.

Born in 1951 and starting to school in 1956, I was never taught how to use or maintain a fountain pen. I had used refillable pens for art projects but always had someone at my elbow who took care of the pens.

I purchased a couple of inexpensive Parker fountain pens, one dark blue on the outside and one burgundy as I recall, and some refill cartridges and began to write with them. It's true—I could go on and on for hours, well at least for thirty minutes, without hand cramps. But because I was writing every morning, I quickly accumulated a pile of spent cartridges, little translucent tubes that had no further use. That's when I came upon the idea of refilling them myself.

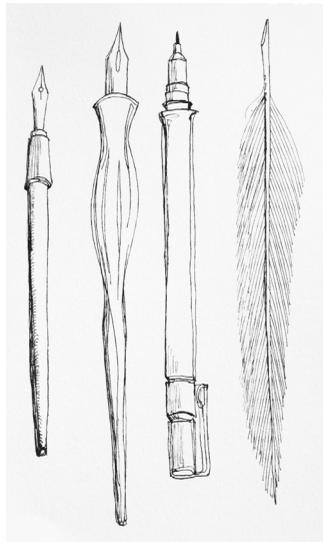
I no longer remember who suggested the refill method I adopted, but I went to the drugstore and bought two or three syringes, cut off the sharp end (to avoid stabbing myself), purchased a bottle of ink, and refilled my pens. I reused the same plastic cartridges for years and only kept a few brand new pre-filled ones on hand as backup cartridges for travel. (I've never figured out how to plug up the ones I refill so they don't spill during transport.)

I've had many adventures with these pens. In addition to happily reporting my daily activities, recording the endless stream of thoughts that fill my brain, and writing portions of books with them, I've had a pen explode when I opened it on an airplane. That's how I learned that one should not fill the cartridge to capacity before a flight. I guess lower air pressure allows the ink to explode when uncapped. It made a lovely small mess on my notebook and on my hands.

I've also had the ink spray everywhere when inserting the needle into the cartridge and pressing the plunger. A small air bubble can form right at the opening of the cartridge, and when it bursts little drops of ink fly a remarkable distance.

Then there's the problem of the clogged nib, which manages to spread ink onto my middle finger while I'm writing. These misadventures led me to become a fan of blue water-based washable ink. Once I switched to this less staining ink, I've been happily filling pens, traveling with them, and writing ever since.

(Continued on back.)



Sue Sneddon

Calendar

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

March 7–9, 2014

FACILITATING DEEPER PRACTICES of Transformative Social Change

The Stone House in Mebane, NC

Join social change leaders and practitioners to dive into a transformational approach to working with groups.

Leaders: Claudia Horwitz & Marian Urquilla

Contact: www.stonecircles.org

March 8, 2014, 9:30 am–3:00 pm

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, 2014

Pullen Baptist Church, 1801 Hillsborough St., Raleigh, NC

Program includes InterPlay, singing, dance, yoga, drumming, art exhibit, and more.

Cost: Free, sponsored by A Place for Women to Gather

Contact: www.womengather.org

*March 11, 2014, 11:30 am–2 pm (2nd Tuesday, monthly)

THE ART OF CONSCIOUS AGING: An Ongoing Group

Colony Hills Clubhouse, 3060 Colony Rd., Durham, NC

Free. No need to register. Bring your lunch.

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

March 12–16, 2014

WANDERING HOME: A Retreat for Women

Incarnating the Beloved Community, Re-membering s Spiritual Practice

Avila, Durham, NC

Wandering Home is a place to bring your hunger, your vision, your practice, your whole self to encounter and reclaim, indeed to indigenize Christian community and practice in life-giving, home-coming, transforming ways.

Leaders: Wendy Farley, Maggie Kulyk, & Marcia Mount Shoop, theologian, author, and Presbyterian minister.

Contact: www.marciamountshoop.com

* March 14–15, 2014, Fri., 7–9 pm; Sat., 9:30 am–3:30 pm

SHORT TAKES ON THE SELF: Writing Workshop with

Carol Henderson

Colony Hills Clubhouse, 3060 Colony Rd., Durham, NC

Through carefully selected prompts, we will explore watershed moments, life themes, and the evolution of our sense of self. We will plumb memory, dreams, and point of view—using what we unearth to write more deeply, find meaning, and create compelling stories and essays. This workshop is open to writers in all genres and all levels of experience. Open to men and women.

Leader: Carol Henderson (www.carolhenderson.com)

Cost: \$125

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

*March 18, 2014, Tuesday

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 21, 2014, 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.

Cost: \$25

Leader: Chizuko Sueyoshi and others

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

March 21–22, 2014, Friday & Saturday, 8:30 am–5:00 pm

DISMANTLING RACISM WORKSHOP

Workshop is designed to ground us in a shared language, analysis, and history of race and racism.

Center for Documentary Studies, Durham, NC

Contact: www.dismantlingracism.org



March 22, 2014, Saturday, 9:30 am–5:00 pm

SPRING HARVEST

Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, Whitsett, NC

Nourish what's waiting to come alive. A day of creativity and immersion in nature will encourage germination of seeds within us that want to grow. Includes writing, simple drawings, sounding and movement.

Leaders: Ann Simon Koppelman and Diantha Rau

Cost: \$55–\$85, sliding scale

Contact: Diantha Rau, www.diantharau.com

March 24–May 12, 2014, Mondays, 7:00–9:00 pm

WRITING FOR OUR LIVES: A Prompt Writing

Workshop

Five Oaks Clubhouse, 5109 Pine Cone Dr., Durham, NC

If you are grieving the loss of a loved one, you know how isolating and lonely grief can feel. Join us and take time to remember, to get your thoughts down, to reflect through writing, and to share with others.

Leader: Heidi Gessner, UCC Minister and chaplain

Cost: \$195

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

March 27, 2014, Thursday, 6:00 pm

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE of the Sallie Bingham Ctr.

Room 217, Perkins Library, Duke Univ., Durham, NC

Sallie Bingham will be the featured speaker at this

program celebrating the center's 25th anniversary.

Contact: www.library.duke.edu/rubenstein/bingham/

*April 8, 2014, Tuesday, 9:30 am–4:00 pm

WHEN GRANDMOTHERS SPEAK, THE EARTH WILL HEAL

Timberlake Earth Sanctuary, Whitsett, NC (Greensboro)

It has been well said that in today's technological world, grandmothers have a special role to fulfill in sharing their love of the natural world with succeeding generations. The day retreat will include time spent at nature's pace. Will include earth prayers, nature walks and special ways of sharing our love of the earth with children.

Leaders: Carolyn Toben, founder of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World, & Anita Mcleod, director of the Elder Women Project, RCWMS

Cost: \$80, includes lunch

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

*April 13–18, 2014

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 16, 2014, Wednesday, 7:00–8:30 pm

CONSIDER THE CONVERSATION: A Documentary

Main Library, Durham, NC

Film screening and discussion on end-of-life issues.

Cost: Free and open to the public.

Co-sponsored by RCWMS.

April 17, 2014, Thursday, 6:00 pm

FREEDOM MEANS EVERYBODY: Mab Segrest Lecture

Richard White Auditorium, East Campuses, Duke Univ.

Speaker: Mab Segrest, Professor of Gender & Women's Studies, Connecticut College. Segrest's personal papers are held by the Sallie Bingham Center.

Sponsors: Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture and Duke Women's Studies

Contact: www.library.duke.edu/rubenstein/bingham/

*May 4–11, 2014

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

Future Weeks of Quiet & Writing:

September 21–28, 2014

January 2–9, 2015

Tumbling...

Gripping my cell phone, I slumped into a chair.

"I forgot to get pap smears." She sighed. "I had this little pain. It got worse, but I'd just take another Tylenol. I was too busy with the boys to see the doctor. But then Andy started realizing I was up to twenty Tylenols a day."

Caroline faced her diagnosis with absolute grit, fueled by absolute terror about any prospect of leaving her sons motherless. Over the next two years she chose the most radical treatments. "Bring. It. On," she'd tell me on the phone, making each word a grenade she was hurling at an enemy. She consulted a naturopathic healer, joined a prayer group, bought tapes on how positive thinking can cure cancer.

For a while she went into remission. Later scans suggested the cancer might have returned, but when doctors operated they saw nothing. She called me with the news, and I felt weightless with relief.

A year later, though, Caroline said the tumors were back. All over. Her voice on the phone, raspy now, swerved among emotions:
— "They're giving me a ten percent chance. I'll *be* part of that ten percent."
— "I can't do this to my boys. Why can't we just enjoy life like everyone else?"
— "People talk about heaven, but I have heaven here right now, dammit."
— "Why is this happening? What magic words am I supposed to say?"

I prayed. I tried to envision golden light around her. But I had no magic words.

I can't swallow my breakfast on the morning I will drive to see her. Then it hits: I don't want to go. I really, really don't want to go. I don't want to have to take in the visual fact of a person who is definitely, inescapably, going to die. Especially not this person. Not Caroline.

Underneath my grief, do I imagine Caroline is abandoning me? No, that's not right. This is not "abandoning." That's crazy, she has cancer, she can't help having cancer, she can't help dying, my God she certainly doesn't want to die, plus I hardly ever see her these days, it's not like I have some claim on her that should somehow preclude her leaving me. It's not like she's my daughter. Is it?

Now I'm at her house, now walking into her bedroom, walking into the unknown, into the rocket ship that will take me who knows where, forgetting to breathe, and there she is, struggling to hitch up on her elbow, turning her face toward me. Then toppling like a statue back on the pillow.

"Hey." Her voice a long way down a hole. Coughing once, then again.

"Hey, Caroline." Are her eyes paler than I remember? I want to touch her, like wanting to touch the page of a rare book. Fragile, impermanent. I even want to do what a mother would do and climb into bed next to her. But I don't.

"How are you?" The words leave my mouth before I can take them back. They hang in the air. She stares at me. For a moment she looks like she doesn't know me. Her eyes half close.



Finally: "How *am* I?" Several breaths. "I'm spent."

Her lips stick together, release with a snap. She reaches for a glass on the bedside table, extends her mouth toward the orange liquid, juggles the glass back. The glass almost tips as she sets it down. Should I help her? I order my hands to stay folded in my lap, to not betray my worry that the glass might fall.

I find another pillow, place it behind her head. I did this for my mother when she was frail and almost gone, the pillow behind the head, the need to offer a gesture, any gesture. But Mother was eighty-nine. Caroline is thirty-nine.

Caroline turns her eyes onto me. "I've been reading the Bible. I looked up all the stories about Jesus healing people back then. The only thing is." She pauses. I'm not sure she'll finish the sentence. Then: "He doesn't seem to be healing me."

Some might hasten to assure Caroline she's being healed not in a physical way but in some spiritual way she can't yet understand. That might be profound, even true. But if I were Caroline and somebody told me that? Don't give me platitudes! I'd think, maybe even say. Don't distance yourself from my pain by trying to smooth over my despair. I'm *dying*, for Christ's sake. Soon I'll be *dead*. This is serious business. Give me answers!

I nod slowly at her, looking into her eyes, affirming and absorbing the brutality of this present injustice, trying as much as I can to fill myself with her, to take hold of her immense pain and attempt somehow to shift some into me. To mingle all her frayed parts with all of mine.

She holds my gaze. For a moment it's like two separate silk ribbons arising, intertwining.

After a while, Andy enters. It's time for me to go. Caroline leans forward, a bare branch of a tree. I kiss her on her cheek. "Love you."

"Love you." The sound of a dry leaf falling.

I take three steps and look back and already she is sliding down and turning away and collapsing like a house of cards.

Lying in bed that night, I close my eyes. On the inside of my eyelids I see Caroline's eyes, sunken, vacant. I open my eyes: same image. I can see nothing else.

Three days later, Andy calls. I step out to the porch. I stare toward green hostas, the neighbor's yellow house. I know I'm beginning my first day in a foreign country. Everything vibrating with strangeness. Blankness arising all around me. My ears frantically erecting a barrier to the terrible words Andy is trying to make me hear.

Liz Dowling-Sendor is a writer, editor, and Episcopal priest; she grew up in Beaufort, SC and lives in Chapel Hill, NC.[stream](#)

Blue Ink...

I've tried more expensive fountain pens but never found one I liked very well and always returned to the garden variety Parkers. Until my then boyfriend, now husband, gave me a yellow fountain pen made by Lamy. Lovely to look at and quite comfortable in my hand, it quickly became the pen of choice and the Parkers were relegated to a desk drawer. Now I have several Lamys, identical except for their outside colors: yellow, spring green, and turquoise.

On a morning like this one, all the pens are charged and ready to write. That's because yesterday, I found them all to be empty and wrote with a back up disposable fountain pen that a friend gave me a few years ago. I decided to refill the pens first thing this morning and have been writing with one of the yellow ones for about half an hour now.

In addition to using a fountain pen, Natalie Goldberg also suggests cheap spiral notebooks. She was correct in saying that fancy journals are too expensive to encourage the quantity of words one needs to pour onto the page before getting to anything interesting or useful. Mind you, writing is the point, not getting anywhere, but the pretty books seem insulted by page after page of rubbish.

So, I bought cheap spiral notebooks and filled them with words. As time went on, I filled big filing boxes with notebooks, almost never looking back at any of them except to transcribe a brief section or to pull out a date or detail for a piece I was working on. Somewhere between storage box number two and number three, I got tired of the way the metal spirals tangled with one another and switched to only slightly more expensive composition books that are stitched at the spine. These open flat, the most important feature in a journal, and they resist the urge to grab hold of one another in storage.

These stitched journals also tend to have slightly nicer paper, increasing the pleasure of moving the pen across the page. My favorites are made by ClaireFontaine, but I'm not often in Paris where they are inexpensive. I also like Moleskin and those standard black and white composition books available in office supply stores.

A truly dedicated writer might carry her journal with her. I am so afraid that I might lose it, or even worse, leave it where some unsuspecting soul might read it, that I leave it on a small table next to the breakfast table where I will place this one in a moment.

Happy writing, and for heaven's sake, make your self as physically comfortable as possible while writing. Writing is hard enough; you don't want to let hand cramps or a hard-to-open journal keep you from it.



J. Stokes

Notes

WINNERS

We are pleased to announce the winners of the 2014 RCWMS Essay Contest. First place goes to Liz Dowling-Sendor of Chapel Hill, NC, for her essay, "Like a Tumbling Stream," which appears on page one of this newsletter. Second place goes to Mary Edwards of Seattle, WA, and third place goes to Deana Vassar of Wake Forest, NC. The theme was intergenerational relationships among women. Many thanks to the RCWMS trustees who judged the contest this year: Emma Akpan, Meghan Florian, and Marcy Litle.

MORAL MARCH

Many of us connected with RCWMS attended the Moral March in Raleigh, NC, on Saturday, Feb. 8, 2014 Also known as HKonJ (Historic Thousands on Jones Street), the march drew 30,000 to 80,000 people, depending on which source you consult. People came from as far away as Boston to raise their voices in protest about the current North Carolina legislature's policies of voter suppression, denying health insurance to thousands, cutting thousands more off of unemployment, restricting access to safe legal abortions, cutting budgets for education and early childhood programs, and more. The march and the 2013 Moral Monday protests brought together the broadest, most diverse coalition of people since the Fusion Coalition of the 1890s. Together they declare: *Forward together, not one step back!*

RCWMS

RCWMS is a thirty-six-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.

RCWMS Trustees: Emma, Akpan, Barbara Anderson, Meghan Florian, Jenny Graves, Roxane Gwyn, Erin Lane, Marcy Litle, Bonny Moellenbrock, Lori Pistor, Candice Provey, and Rebecca Vidra

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SUBSCRIPTIONS to South of the Garden cost \$20 and run for 12 months from the time placed. Foreign or First Class is \$25. A subscription is free to anyone for whom the subscription fee is a burden. Tax-deductible contributions over and above the subscription fee are appreciated. Send checks to RCWMS, 1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC 27701, or go to www.rcwms.org.

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