

South of the Garden

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

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June 2016

News

by Jeanette Stokes

Our colleague Rebecca Welper and her husband Lee had a baby on February 25, 2016. After a somewhat dramatic entrance three weeks early, baby Frieda arrived healthy and adorable. As most of you know, babies eat, sleep, poop, and cry, but they don't provide much adult conversation. So, after ten weeks at home, Rebecca and Frieda came back to work. In all the years I've worked for RCWMS, we've never had a baby in the office regularly. Those of you who are parents know there are a lot of things you can do with a babe in arms, but when Rebecca needs to do something without holding Frieda, there are plenty of others who are willing. We are having a blast. Frieda is a joy! I can't believe our good fortune in having a tiny baby at RCWMS.

Being around Frieda has made me worry more than usual about the state of the world. What kind of world are we offering her? Poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and environmental degradation threaten at every turn. In North Carolina, the legislature seems hell-bent on legislating nonsense. A couple of years ago, they passed a bill that essentially said there is no global warming, no seas are rising, and no policies can be made based on what's not happening. This year, they attempted to legislate people's genders by insisting that transgender people be forced to use a restroom corresponding to the sex listed on their birth certificate.

Some people are talking sense about issues. Feminist theologian Jennifer Harvey lectured in Durham this spring. She argues that we need to stop talking about racial reconciliation and start talking about repentance and reparations. I highly recommend her book, *Dear White Christians*. I attended another lecture this spring by Sylvia Hood Washington on environmental racism. She noted that communities such as Flint, Michigan, with more people of color, are at risk for more environmental hazards than others.

Frieda isn't our only recent good news:

- Our writing workshops are going well, and we have published a lovely booklet from an intergenerational workshop called *Turning Points*. You can purchase the booklet by the same name for \$5 from our office.
- We had two great art workshops at the beach with Sue Sneddon in February. A woman from Greensboro who swore she couldn't draw a straight line attended the beginning workshop and was stunned by the beautiful art she was able to make. Don't be scared of trying some art. Come join us sometime. Sue is the kindest teacher and the beach is so beautiful that time of year.
- RCWMS sponsored two Japanese Tea Gatherings this spring, and I was in a television segment about the tea gatherings that aired on UNC TV. You can watch it here: video.uncv.org/video/2365730335.
- See RCWMS news blog for news: rcwms.org/blog/ and RCWMS books and media blog for reviews: wordsandspirit.tumblr.com.



photo by Rebecca Welper
quilt by Márcia Rego

Practices

[Note: In the fall, RCWMS will publish *Just Keep Going: Advice on Writing & Life*, by Jeanette Stokes. Here's an excerpt from Chapter 8, "Practices for the Long Haul."]

I never planned to be a writer. I became a writer, an editor, and a nonprofit manager without setting out to be any of those things. I had thought I would be a mother, a mathematician, or maybe a politician. Life hardly ever happens the way we imagine, and in my case, I'm glad of that.

Sometimes jobs happen, and as a nonprofit director I had to fill up blank newsletter space, and then divorce happened, and then this newsletter writer published a book of her essays, because "living well (i.e., publishing a book) is the best revenge." And the next thing I knew using metaphors and making my friends laugh turned into the thing I want to do the most and the thing that will probably also torture me for the rest of my life.

Some days I wake up thinking, "I'm going to give it up. I'm simply going to stop trying to write." But I don't. It's too seductive.

I've discovered a secret: if I write just a little bit every day, it eventually adds up to being a book. It's amazing. If you walked west from Durham for just one mile every day, in about 2,500 days (that's seven years), you'd be in California. But you'd have to be able to tolerate the going. It's not easy. One young man I met explained that he gave up writing because, as he said, "How would you like to have homework for the rest of your life?"

That is what being a writer feels like. It's worse than the two years I studied Hebrew with a retired seminary professor. I went to the professor's house in the next town once a week for an hour but then suffered for the remaining hours of the week, because I wasn't doing my homework. The homework hung over my head ALL the time. Every time I looked up from my job or my dinner or got home from a nice walk, I'd think, "I've got to do my Hebrew homework." I loved the professor and had to learn the material before I could be ordained as a Presbyterian minister, but it practically ruined two years of my life.

That wasn't torture enough. Shortly after I finished learning an acceptable amount of Hebrew to satisfy the Presbyterians and was ordained as a minister, I stumbled into thinking of myself as a writer. Because I noticed I had been writing. And then, as the young man who gave up writing said, I had homework every day. Permanently. For the rest of my life. Some days, I resent having homework every morning; but other days, I appreciate the assigned task, because it helps me remember what I want. Writing every day is something I want to do. And I often feel better after I've done it.

One morning during a writing retreat at Pelican House, I felt like a virtuous writer. I accidentally woke

(Continued on back.)

Calendar

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

*June 25, 2016, Saturday, 2:00–4:30 pm
FINISH YOUR BOOK IN THREE DRAFTS, with
Stuart Horwitz
Durham, NC

Have you ever asked yourself while writing: How many drafts is this going to take? Stuart Horwitz says the answer is three, provided you approach each draft in the right spirit and know what steps to take between drafts. He will discuss the best outlook and direction for each draft so that you can increase your efficiency, satisfaction, and engagement with both your writing process and your final product.

Leader: Stuart Horwitz founded Book Architecture, a firm of fabulous editors, (www.BookArchitecture.com) and has written three books on his method, including *Finish Your Book in Three Drafts*.

Cost: \$35. To register: bit.ly/1MAMQUR

*July 18, 2016, Monday, 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 summer. 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, welper.rcwms@gmail.com

July 26–29, 2016
BRITAIN & IRELAND School of Feminist Theology
University of Winchester, Winchester, UK
Feminist reflections on abundant life in the 21st Century.
Leaders: Mary Condren, Sr. Patricia Santos, Rabbi Eli Sarah, and Anne-Clare Mulder.
More details: www.winchester.ac.uk/ITP

July 31–August 6, 2016
WRITING WITH SPIRIT: Meditation & Writing
Ghost Ranch, Abiquiu, NM
Open to a deeper creativity through meditation and writing. Use contemplative and mindfulness-based practices as well as writing prompts to delve deeper and to enrich lead your stories, memoirs, novels-in-progress, poems, sermons or creative nonfiction.
Leader: Nancy Kilgore is a writer and pastoral counselor in Vermont and New Hampshire.
Contact: www.ghostranch.org

*August 13, 2016, Saturday, 9:30 am–3:30 pm
THE HIDDEN WORD: Writing with Kuan Yin
Durham, NC
Do you hold deep feelings in your heart that beg for expression or healing? Would you like to write poetry but are afraid you are "not a poet"? In his most recent book, *Becoming Kuan Yin: The Evolution of Compassion*, Stephen Levine shares a teaching from Kuan Yin about the medicinal qualities of poetry that offer hidden healing, saying, "The right word at the right time is strong medicine." In this one day workshop we will use Centered Writing Practice, meditation, and visualization to open our hearts and invite the words we need in the moment. No experience necessary. To write medicine poetry, you only need a willing heart. Peggy suggests reading Levine's book prior to attending.
Leader: Author Peggy Tabor Millin is a writing teacher and a student of Soto Zen Buddhism who lives in



Durham, NC. More on Peggy: clarityworksonline.com.
Cost: \$65, for women only
Contact: RCWMS, rcwmsnc@aol.com

September 9–11, 2016, Friday-Sunday
SISTERLY CONVERSATIONS 2016: Nurturing Our
Spirits—Sharing Our Sacred Practices
Kirkridge, Bangor, PA
Focus on intimate connections between spirituality and sexuality and ways our LGBTQ lives (and our allies') reflect unique experiences we share.
Leader: Mary E. Hunt, feminist theologian and co-director, WATER in Silver Spring, MD.
Cost: \$375. Details: www.kirkridge.org

September 11–17, 2016
CHOOSING CONSCIOUS ELDERHOOD: Discovering
Purpose, Passion, & the Call to Service in the Elder Third
of Life
Laughing Heart Lodge Retreat Center, Hot Springs, NC
A dynamic introduction to conscious aging and the inner work that is important to becoming a conscious elder. Will include reflective time in nature, life review and legacy work, dreamwork, ceremony, sharing councils, and a 24-hour solo.
Leaders: Ron Pevny and Anne Wennhold
Cost: \$1,095, tuition and meals. For lodging options, contact Karen, 828-622-0165, laughingheartlodge.com.
Contact: Ron Pevny, 970-247-7943, ron@centerforconsciouseldering.com, www.centerforconsciouseldering.com

*September 18–25, 2016
A WEEK OF QUIET & WRITING FOR WOMEN
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
Come spend a week of quiet and writing with a supportive group of women in Pelican House, at the beautiful Trinity Center on Emerald Isle, NC. We observe silence in the daytime so participants can read, write, or rest. In the evenings we gather to reflect on the day and often share our work with one another. Room and meals are included. Everyone gets her own room, her own space, her own time.
Cost: \$750, includes lodging and meals.
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

*October 3, 10, 17, 24 (4 Mondays) 7:00–9:00 pm
SEASONS OF OUR LIVES: An Intergenerational
Writing Workshop
RCWMS Office, 1202 Watts St., Durham, NC
We'll explore archetypes such as maiden/mother/crone, and find new metaphors, as we write in a supportive, intergenerational community. Open to all who identify as women.
Leaders: Anita McLeod, director of RCWMS Elder Women Project, and Rebecca Welper, MFA
Cost: Pay your age, starting at \$35
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

*October 13–14, 2016, Thursday–Friday
HOMEGROWN: NC Women's Preaching Festival
Trinity Avenue Presbyterian Church, Durham, NC
Theme: Her Voice Through the Seasons
In an ecumenical spirit of collegiality, we'll lift up the voices of local clergywomen to inspire, learn, and hone our craft. We'll hear wonderful preaching and discuss the art of proclamation in all its forms. We'll pray, eat, worship, and celebrate together.
More details: ncwomenpreaching.wordpress.com

*Future Weeks of Quiet & Writing: Jan. 1–8, May 7–14

Layers

Karen Erlichman of Pacifica, CA, won second place in the 2016 RCWMS Essay Contest for "Layers of White Privilege," which is printed here.

In the first few months of dating, my partner and I had our first argument—about money. The details of the disagreement are less important than our reactions, emotions and assumptions, all of which were powerfully shaped by our personal family histories and our cultural differences. I was raised in a white, middle-class, Jewish family in a Philadelphia suburb; she was raised in a working-class African American family and lived in South Central Los Angeles until she was ten years old. Over the past 23 years we have learned to communicate and navigate these cross-cultural terrains together with forthrightness and compassion. From the beginning, our relationship has been a crucible for exploring privilege and oppression on a daily basis, particularly since each of us has worked professionally within our own ethnic communities for decades. Code-switching and translating are everyday practices in our house.

Over the course of my life, I have contemplated the multitude of experiences that have shaped my awareness and experience of privilege and oppression. Particular people and events pushed me to explore my privilege as a white person, as well as my experience as a targeted minority as a Jew, a woman, and a lesbian. My family has always emphasized the importance of respecting diversity and of speaking out against injustice. My parents were strongly committed to ensuring that we attended excellent public schools with racially diverse students. We talked together often about racism, anti-Semitism, oppression and the importance of social justice activism.

As a college student at a progressive liberal arts college, there were many times when racism erupted on campus. Whether between students and faculty/administration, or student-student, everyday routines would often be interrupted by campus organizing. One particular memory comes to mind from what we dubbed the "winter of our discontent" in my first year of college. After an African American student had been harassed on campus, student activists effectively shut down classes and created impromptu sessions for students to address issues of privilege, bias and oppression, with students of color in one group and white students in another group. I remember my innocent yearning to join the students of color group as a Jew, and to be with my friends. I did not experience myself as part of the white majority, but I am forever indebted to the older, more seasoned student, a woman of color who firmly and lovingly steered me into the large classroom where white students were gathering. "The best way you can be an ally is to do your own work as a white person, Karen."

My white privilege has a complex relationship to my identity as a Jew, a woman, and a lesbian. For most of my life I have moved through the world visibly wearing my white-skinned privilege as well as my middle-class privilege, both of which have afforded me access to educational and financial resources. My Jewish identity is invisible unless I choose to make it visible, either by wearing Jewish markers such as a Jewish star or a kippah/yarmulke (religious skullcap), or when I inhabit Jewish spaces such as a synagogue.



art by Sue Sneddon

Because I am cisgender (i.e. a person whose self-identity conforms with the assigned gender that corresponds to their biological sex) and my gender expression is femme-identified (i.e. feminine in appearance and affect), I am usually assumed to be heterosexual until or unless I am out in the world with my African American butch-identified wife, or inhabiting LGBT communal spaces. As an interracial, interfaith couple, there are very few places where we simply blend in.

Simultaneously, I benefit from white privilege on a daily basis in numerous individual and institutional ways. As a white person, I never get seated at the back of a restaurant by the kitchen or the busing station. I am not followed around suspiciously when shopping in a retail store. When my wife and I travel together, we always have to consider where we will be safe because of "what we are." As a white person traveling alone, or traveling with my white relatives, I can easily choose to revert to the assumption of safety that comes with white skin privilege. Having said all of the above, for decades people have asked me things like, "What are you?" Many have assumed I am Greek, Italian, or Hispanic/Latina.

When I recall that first year of college, I remember the moment when I was willing to pause briefly, to take a deep breath and discern how best to respond. Discernment requires patient inner listening all the way down through layers of self protection to hear the deepest truth. There have been countless experiences since then in which I have had the opportunity (and the need) to pause and notice when and how white privilege is deeply embedded in my bones just as multigenerational persecution and trauma as a Jew also live in my cellular memory.

Later, as a graduate social work student I heard, observed and felt a systematic "do-gooder" habit of separating people into theoretical and practical binaries of victim-perpetrator, oppressor-oppressed, us-them, good-evil. I remember thinking to myself one day in class, "There is nothing that any one person is capable of that I am not also capable of under the same or similar circumstances." Sometimes there is barely time to breathe before responding. Taking a pause seems overly simplistic, yet is actually a powerful tool of resistance. In the pause I notice what is activated in me—thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, images, impulses:

- What is being asked of me?
- What is needed right now? What does the situation call for?
- What assumptions am I making? What needs clarification?
- How is my white privilege informing my thoughts, feelings, and reactions?
- Where can I step back from the access and entitlement that white privilege affords me and make space for the voices and actions of people of color?
- How much courage and risk is necessary in this moment in the service of social justice?
- What guidance do I receive when I listen to my body? What internal embodied cues guide me to my deepest truth in response to the above questions?
- How do I experience the presence of God in this pause moment?

My theology and spiritual practices have always been profoundly connected to my social justice work. Moreover, as my spiritual life has grown and matured, so too has my commitment to ongoing self

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Practices...

up at 4:30 and was writing before 6:30 AM. I felt virtuous, as though the day was a success before I even ate breakfast. All day when I thought, "I should be writing," I could congratulate myself by saying, "You already did that before 6:30 AM."

I will admit that I bounced in and out of bed between five and six o'clock that morning, because I was at the beach, had a window facing the ocean, and kept getting up to see if the sun had turned the horizon pink yet. When it finally did, I started wondering whether I should go out for an early morning walk. Was that the day for my sunrise walk? I often get one when I'm at the beach, usually on the morning I accidentally wake up too early. But my body kept wanting to crawl back in the bed, which I did. But then I read the funny piece by the mommy writer, and, my brain clicked on, and I heard, "I didn't plan to be a writer." I opened the computer and wrote much of what you have just read on the last two pages.

I didn't see that sunrise from the beach; I watched it in snatches from the window by my computer. The miracle of a new day was going on just beyond my mist-covered window facing the sea.

And then the second-guessing starts again. Did I make the right choice? Was writing 750 words better than walking by the sea at dawn or better than lying in bed and getting the other two hours of sleep I'm sure I needed? I've long said that creativity is about choices, and I make them every day. So do you. You might consider writing some of them down.

Essay Contest

The 2017 RCWMS Essay Contest will open October 15.

THEME: Essays should focus on the environment or spiritual ecology. We invite submissions that consider this theme in creative ways. How has your life been shaped by the natural world? How does it affect your faith, values, work, or spiritual practices? What efforts have you made to protect the earth or its natural resources?

DETAILS: The contest is open to adult women. Essays should be 1,400 words or less. Submissions will be open October 15, 2016 through January 15, 2017. Submission details will be available in August.

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 2017.



Layers...

exploration and action in the service of social change. Cultivating the capacity to discern right action is critical in relationship to political and spiritual collaboration across boundaries of race, religion, class, gender and theology. I am intentionally using the term discernment here in its fullest theological capacity—attunement to the movement of the Ineffable One within me and in my life.

It is a powerful act of resistance to publicly refuse to hide behind my Jewishness or my whiteness. It has become as essential as breathing to have people in my life that will tell me the truth about myself and with whom I can also tell my truth—and vice versa. And I fully engage all the parts of my Self as an ally, an activist and a change agent.

Karen Lee Erlichman, D.Min, LCSW provides psychotherapy, spiritual direction, supervision and mentoring in San Francisco. She is a faculty member in the Morei Derekh Jewish Spiritual Direction Training Program and in the Jewish Spirituality D.Min program at the Graduate Theological Foundation. She is a facilitator with the Center for Courage and Renewal. More: www.karenerlichman.com.

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 grateful for support from Kalliopeia Foundation, The E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, Vanguard Charitable, Emerald Isle Realty, and the Triangle Community Foundation (A-Squared Fund and Bass Walter Fund).

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