

South of the Garden

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

Volume 37, Number 1

March 2016

Spring

by Jeanette Stokes

On an unseasonably warm February 1st, a group of women gathered at RCWMS for an evening of "Writing with St. Brigid." They looked at the history of this ancient Celtic goddess who was honored on Imbolc, the traditional beginning of spring. Later Christianized as St. Brigid (or Brigit), this divine feminine figure continues to inspire, and on this particular evening she evoked thoughtful and powerful writing about healing, planting, and goddess power.

We are pleased to announce the winners of the 2016 RCWMS Essay Contest. The theme was "Experiencing White Supremacy." First winner is Danyelle O'Hara of St. Paul, MN, for "Hand Wringing and Reckoning," which appears in this newsletter. Second place goes to Karen Erlichman of Pacifica, CA for "Layers of White Privilege." Many thanks to this year's judges: Marcy Litle, Marcia Rego, and Rebecca Welper. The judges report that they were touched by the thoughtful honesty expressed by all the writers as they tackled this challenging subject. We send our thanks to all who entered our contest!

We want to say a big THANK YOU again to everyone who contributed during our year-end fundraising drive. We ended up raising \$23,000. Thank you! Another big shout out goes to first-time donors, who contributed \$555 of that total amount. We can't thank you enough for turning the mission of RCWMS into reality and helping us weave feminism and spirituality into a vision of justice for the world.

This past fall we also received generous funding from the Kalliopeia Foundation and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, to support our current programs and expand programs for younger women, LGBTQ individuals, and racial justice. The Carpenter grant will support the 5th annual Homegrown: NC Women's Preaching Festival in October, and an LGBTQ Spirituality celebration we're developing for 2017. We're very excited to share more about all of our plans as they continue to emerge. Keep up to date on all RCWMS goings on at our news blog, www.rcwms.org/blog.

In March, we will offer our annual writing workshop with Carol Henderson. WORKOUTS TO STRETCH YOUR WRITING MUSCLES will be Friday and Saturday, March 18-19, 2016. I always get lots of inspiration and lots of writing done at Carol Henderson's workshops.

A favorite event of mine is coming up in April. In the TRADITIONAL JAPANESE TEA GATHERING at Duke Gardens, guests sit on tatami mats on the floor (or in chairs) while the host enters through a shoji screen door, bringing sweets and the makings for tea. The sound of hot water being poured from a wooden ladle and the sharp taste of the frothy green tea help me to relax and to focus on the present moment. For more info, see CALENDAR.



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Hand Wringing & Reckoning

by Danyelle O'Hara

Recently, I was involved in completing a large collaborative report. I edited the full document after coordinating multiple partners to make their contributions. When the product was signed, sealed, and delivered to its final destination, my supervising colleague sent an email to all parties involved in the project thanking them for their contributions. He did not thank or recognize me—publicly or privately—for the key roles I played in producing the report.

I noted the oversight, but I don't think my colleague did until one of his email recipients sent a "reply all" thanking me. Awkward. Even more awkward was when my colleague made an ineffectual attempt to recover himself by hitting "reply all" to the previous message echoing the thanks to me. If we'd been in a conference room together, I would have crawled under the table.

This kind of thing happens all the time doesn't it? Spouses, family members, friends, and colleagues—we all sometimes fail to thank the people who do the most.

What also almost always happens for me, a life-long African American woman, when I am on the receiving end of such an experience with a white person in a position of authority, is a chain of events. First, a rush of shame. Indignation and anger invariably come later, but the raw immediate emotion is shame. Next, an almost uncontrollable impulse to assuage the feelings of the person who has slighted me. Mindboggling, but I'm telling this like it is: I take responsibility for ensuring that a person who has forgotten me, ignored me, dissed me, etc. doesn't feel badly for their behavior.

This time, though, I made a conscious decision to respond differently.

I didn't count the number of times following the awkward emails that my colleague lauded my excellent work on the report. It came up in every follow-up email and phone contact we had. I felt badly about my colleague's omission, to be sure, but much more strongly, I felt a resolve to not involve myself in making him feel okay about his shoddy treatment of me. Not rush to his rescue and deliver what he needed from me in the wake of his omission: to know that he wasn't as bad as his behavior indicated he was. And maybe he wasn't. But I chose to let him determine that for himself. White people often want me to bail them out of their bad behavior, and I usually do it because I'm conditioned to and because it gets me the response I seek—to be the well-liked and approved-of Negro.

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Calendar

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

March 5, April 2, May 7, & June 4, 2016, 9:30 am-noon
WRITING TOWARD HEALING: Workshops for Adults Grieving the Death of a Loved One
Carol Woods Retirement Community, Chapel Hill, NC
You don't need to consider yourself a writer to attend. Join us for an opportunity to explore our deepest feelings in a safe environment.
Leader: Carol Henderson is a writer and teacher.
Cost: Free. Contact: 919-906-3670 or jane.projectcompassion@gmail.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," says Jerome Stern. Writing begets writing, and that's what we'll do—write a lot and stretch our writing selves. Sample hands-on exercises will help you write more deeply and with more authenticity. We'll work on aspects of craft that will strengthen your understanding and your skills. For women writers of all genres and levels of experience.
Leader: Carol Henderson, writer, editor, & workshop leader is the author of *Losing Malcolm, Farther Along: The Writing Journey of Thirteen Bereaved Mothers*, and more. More: www.carolhenderson.com
Cost: \$125. Register: <http://bit.ly/CHenWriting>
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com.

March 11-13, 2016
DYING INTO LIFE: A Sufi Retreat Weekend
Friends Meeting, 404 Alexander Dr, Durham, NC
Leaders: Murshid Abraham and Mushida Halima Sussman, Senior teachers and Dance leaders in the Sufi Ruhaniat International.
Cost: \$140
Contact: Julie Purcell, 919-475-5323, forjuls@aol.com

*March 20-25, 2016
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 4, 2016, Monday, 7:30-8:30 pm
SACRED TREES AND ANCIENT FORESTS: A Lecture by Dr. Diana Beresford-Kroeger
Scales Arts Center, Wake Forest, Winston-Salem, NC
Botanist, medical biochemist, and "renegade scientist," joins science, spirituality and alternative medicine for better stewardship of the natural world. FREE.
Contact: <http://divinity.wfu.edu>

*April 8, 2016, Friday, choose 10:00 am or 1:00 pm
TRADITIONAL JAPANESE TEA GATHERING
Teahouse, Sarah P. Duke Gardens, Durham, NC
Join RCWMS for a traditional Japanese Tea Gathering. Enjoy the calm simplicity of the tearoom and the beauty of the gardens. Host will demonstrate traditional Japanese tea and guest will enjoy a steaming cup of frothy green tea. Small group. Please choose morning or afternoon seating.
Leader: Chizuko Sueyoshi
Cost: \$25.
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, rcwmsnc@aol.com

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Seasons of Loss

by Jeanette Stokes

It has often seemed to me that more people die right after Christmas than any other time of year. Research says it's not true, but it still seems like that to me.

In January this year, we lost my dear next-door neighbor, Doug. I say our tax dollars killed him, fifty years later. That's what I say. Doug was a Vietnam vet, a survivor of Agent Orange and subsequently leukemia. Thanks to modern medicine, he outran the leukemia for years, but eventually succumbed to the health issues resulting from his service to his country.

I could feel his pride in having served in the Marines every national holiday when Doug and his partner Gil hung an American flag outside their home. I was against the War in Vietnam, and still am, but I'm sorry that so many of my compatriots blamed the returning service men and treated them with such disrespect.

Since Gil grew up in Durham, I assumed that local clergy from his childhood church would lead Doug's memorial service, but I was mistaken. Gil wanted me to lead a graveside service.

On a bright, cold, breezy morning in January just before the big snow, we buried Doug's body on a high place in a city cemetery in the middle of town. Watching the two young Marines, one male and one female, carefully fold the American flag and hand it to Gil created a knot in my chest—a mixture of respect, sadness, and remorse. Respect for Doug, sadness at his passing, and remorse for the way he and other vets have suffered.

Though Doug received decent medical care, I have frequently heard from friends who work for the VA (Veterans Administration hospital) that medical care and all other forms of care for vets is seriously underfunded. This makes me mad. First we endanger (or end) the lives of young Americans in the name of defending the country and then we refuse to provide for them properly when they return. We'll fund all the weapons and ballistics and fancy airplanes the military requests, but then won't take care of the people who did the fighting. One thing has been clear for years: our funding priorities are messed up.

Last fall, in October, I lost another friend, Katherine Royal, because of the effects of Agent Orange, which means I've actually lost two friends in the last few months to that dreaded agent of defoliation and destruction.

Katharine Royal was a member of the planning team for HOMEGROWN: NC Women's Preaching Conference and a new friend. Confined to a wheelchair and under the constant supervision of Isaiah, the service dog she trained, Kat lived with spina bifida. Her father had served in Vietnam and, like my neighbor Doug, was exposed to Agent Orange. Even the VA admits the connection on their website, saying that "spina bifida in biological children of certain Vietnam-era Veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange was caused by the Veterans' military service."

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Hand Wringing...

Being a well-liked, approved-of Negro is a painful and ironic requirement in my liberal, nonprofit, philanthropic, social justice, do-gooding, down-with-the-people, challenging oppression, and dismantling racism world. Although we like to talk about “the revolution,” reality is that funding for it comes from mostly white pockets and my standing in the field depends largely on approval from those people. Not always, but often. People of color carry all kinds of burdens for liberal white people to make them feel good about who they are and their place in the world. We carry those burdens because there could be consequences if we don’t. My professional well-being is largely tied to rewards available to me if and when I do my part to uphold the world as my liberal white colleagues want to see it.

I find myself wondering what W.E.B. Dubois would call this particular burden. There’s something reminiscent of the term Dubois dubbed “Double Consciousness,” where black people know what white people are thinking almost as well as we know what we are thinking. This was imperative during slavery to save one’s black ass, literally. The parallel today, because power and resources are so often controlled by white people, is about saving my job, or maintaining access to white-controlled opportunities. I have to know the white mind in order to navigate the realities they have framed and the resources they control.

The rescuing burden I am talking about is related to Double Consciousness, but it’s not the same. It’s still about staying a couple of steps ahead in order to stay in the good graces, but it’s also about covering and protecting the white ass when it is bared to me. Not only am I undermined, not only do I forgive the poor behavior, but I then make sure the liberal perpetrator doesn’t feel badly for their bad behavior. I do this because the perpetrator feeling badly for their behavior would indicate that they had, indeed, behaved badly. And that does not correspond with the masquerade that they are liberal and progressive and down with dismantling oppression. That they don’t perpetuate the oppression they say they seek to dismantle as easily as they breathe. Or do they? They shouldn’t be made to contemplate that possibility. That’s my job, to make sure they don’t have to.

What I’m talking about here might be unique to the nonprofit, activist, socially progressive world, where white people see themselves as beyond racism. Their image of themselves is as of allies, helpers, people who are making the world better—the good guys. When that image is called into question, it’s a crisis because there’s a whole career, public persona, discourse, and sense of self at stake. It’s obviously a fantasy, but just as obviously, it is where so many people live in terms of self-awareness. One of my roles as a woman of color, if I want to continue reaping the rewards of access to opportunities, is to do my part to make sure this self-image remains intact.

So what happens when I choose not to play the game? What happens when I decide not to rush in and assure my colleague that it’s okay he failed to acknowledge me; assure him that no one even noticed, and if they did, they knew it was unintentional; make it clear

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that it wasn’t just me who produced the report, there were a lot of people involved; remind him that we all make mistakes and in the realm of mistakes that could be made, this one was pretty minor? In short, what happens when I don’t rush in and hold him while he reassembles his image of himself? I think we go into free fall. We don’t know how to be; there is nothing to uphold the structure, and my colleague has to be with himself and whatever his omission of me means. And I have to be with the possibility that I’ve moved off the preferred list onto the shit list.

Some months ago, a commentator on NPR, self-identified as a black man, talked about being out with a couple of friends one evening in Baltimore after the civil unrest there. The fact that this guy is on NPR and the way he talks suggests that he’s had a certain kind of education. He’s a freshly scrubbed, well-educated, possibly middle class man. And you assume he keeps company with similar kinds of guys. So, three of these freshly scrubbed guys out one evening in Baltimore. A white police officer comes and tells them to move along. The police officer then makes reference to the fact that he smells something illegal and implies that it is coming from these men. The men are perplexed because this is not what they are about and soon thereafter it becomes clear that the smells are coming from someone else, a white guy. After everything is sorted out, the police officer says something along the lines of, “Hey guys, sorry about that. You know how it is, right?”

The three men let their silence communicate to the officer, “No, we don’t know.” In the NPR piece, the commentator talked about how he chose not to take on his regular “job” of rescuing the well-meaning white police officer out of his racist blunder. The commentator talked about that moment of what I call “free fall”—that moment when no one knows what to do because we are so unfamiliar with the situation and there is no recognizable social scaffolding to hold onto. The commentator saw the moment and chose not to be the good Negro, not to cover the well-meaning racist white person’s ass. He chose dignity for himself and responsibility for the white police officer.

The commentator decided not to perpetuate the cycle of oppression that day. The cycle of white liberal racism that has white people continuing to step on people of colors’ necks and expecting us to make them feel okay about it. The cycle that has people of color explaining that we understand and reassuring white people who commit acts of racism that they’re not so bad, they’re not like those real racist people.

He didn’t. And I didn’t with my colleague because, really, how is that cycle any different from any we’ve been whirling in for the past five centuries?

I let my colleague do his hand wringing and flustering. I let him send his emails and make his protestations. I said nothing. I had nothing to say. I didn’t understand, so why say I did? Rather, I let my colleague reckon with himself. I don’t know if he did, but at least I didn’t have a hand in robbing him of the opportunity. And in robbing me of my dignity.

Danyelle O’Hara works with nonprofits and foundations on issues related to land, natural resources, and rural people. In the rest of her life, she is a mom to two amazing children, a partner to their wonderful father, and a writer when the spirit moves her. She lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Seasons...

During the night between the two days of the conference last fall, Kat died in her sleep. I said, "Good night," to her at about 9:00 on a Thursday evening in October and when I returned to the conference site the next morning, I learned that she was no longer living. It was a shock and a huge sadness for us all.

Kat was only thirty-three when she died. The size of the crowd at her memorial service a week later attested to the love and admiration people had for her. An energetic organizer on behalf of women, LGBTQ people, and people living with disabilities, she never let people get away with leaving others out.

These losses have reminded me that the ravages of war continue for decades, damaging the lives of generations. When we send people off to war, we place those individuals in harm's way, and we also endanger all who love them, children who may come later, grandchildren, and on it goes. The country seems intent on making war every thirty years or so: World War I, World War II, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. May God help us find other ways to solve our geo-political conflicts so that everyone might live in peace and unafraid.

Stay In Touch

There are many ways to stay in touch with the activities and resources provided by RCWMS.

- Subscribe to our email calendar and event announcements. We try not to drown people with an excessive number of emails.
- Subscribe to this print newsletter. A one-year subscription costs \$20.
- Visit our website: www.rcwms.org. There you will find lots of information about our programs, the history of RCWMS, books and DVDs to purchase. We keep the CALENDAR on the website up to date with events and registration information.
- Visit our blog about books and media, *Words & Spirit*. You will find interesting reviews of books and media: wordsandspirit.tumblr.com
- Visit our BLOG, www.rcwms.org/blog, where you will find news and summaries of our activities.

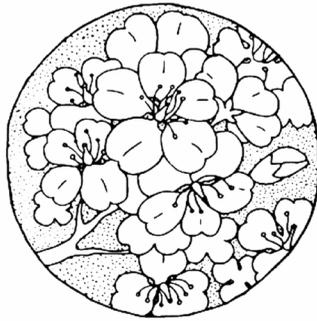


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Calendar...

April 9, 2016, Saturday, 9 am–3 pm
JACK CRUM CONFERENCE
Duke Memorial UMC, 504 W Chapel Hill, Durham, NC
Theme: Dare to Hear—Honest Conversation about Race & the End to White Privilege
Contact: Methodist Fed for Social Action, mfsancc.org

*May 8–15, 2016
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 31–August 6, 2016
WRITING WITH SPIRIT: Meditation & Writing with Nancy Kilgore, MDiv, DMin
Ghost Ranch, Abiquiu, NM
Contact: www.ghostranch.org

*Future Weeks of Quiet & Writing:
September 18–25, 2016, January 1–8, 2017

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 the support of the 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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