

South of the Garden

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

Volume 40, Number 1

March 2019

Spring

by Rebecca Welper

It's hard for me to let go of winter. In December, our three-year-old joined her Yankee parents in embracing the snow storm. She mimicked the main character in her favorite book, *The Snowy Day*, as she marveled at her snowy footprints, tapped the snow off trees with a stick, and inexpertly packed snow together to form snowballs. Nearly every day since it melted she's proclaimed confidently, "It will snow again!" At first I would nod in agreement, but now I shake my head and say, "We'll have to wait till next year." As I approach my sixth year in Durham, I realize I haven't lived in North Carolina long enough to gauge whether these short, wacky winters are typical or getting wackier because of global warming. I fear the latter, and it makes me mad.

Early spring also triggers a certain flavor of grief for me. My mother died seven years ago in February. The change of seasons reminds me how angry I got at the daffodils and crocuses that insisted on blooming that first spring. I still get shocked—and angry—that my mom is gone and that so much life has continued. By the middle of spring, I feel refreshed by the warmer days, but it takes me a while to work through my feelings of resistance. Having a three-year-old, we talk about Big Feelings a lot. I try to model recognizing and honoring feelings, while not getting stuck or swept away by them. It's a daily practice!

Our 2019 essay contest winners do a wonderful job exploring this balance. This year two essays have tied for first place, "The Courage to Say No," by Joan Tilghman and "Dispatches from the Front," by Mindy Oshrain. Writing on the theme "Holy Anger," the essayists do a beautiful job wrestling with anger at injustice, while working to stay grounded and loving in the fight for what's right. You'll find both of these heart-wrenching yet hopeful essays in the pages of this issue.

Special thanks to the essay contest judges (who also serve on the RCWMS Board of Trustees): Cathy Hasty, Márcia Rego, and Rebecca Vidra.

We're offering programs this spring that may help "turn anger into a clarion call," as Oshrain invites us to do in her essay. Carol Henderson will lead writers to imagine different paths their life might have taken or might yet follow this March in "What If? A Writing Workshop." Pat Boswell and Terry Moore-Painter ask "What Will You Do With the Rest of Your Life?" during a day-long workshop at the end of March. And after a successful run last fall, "Doing Our Own Work: An Anti-Racism Seminar for White People" is returning in March and April. This time Melanie Morrison will be joined in her facilitation by Jax Lee Gardner.

Whatever your feelings about this season or what's going on in the world, it can help to come together and share.



Courage

"The Courage to Say No"

by Joan Tilghman

On the morning of January 31, 1969, I was about to give birth to my first child. I was twenty years old. Whether the child was a boy or girl, I knew what the baby's name would be. I hadn't thought much beyond that—except that I knew I wanted to raise a child who was not afraid to say "no."

I was born three years after the second World War and television brought that recent history into my home. We watched programs on the Holocaust with pictures of the dead men, women, and children killed in concentration camps. Some of those images live in my mind today: the face of a young boy with his mouth frozen in a scream, his body having been tossed like an empty box on a heap of other bodies. Flies crawling on the faces of the dead. The walking cadavers Allied troops encountered as they liberated Auschwitz. And I remember thinking that Adolf Hitler and his gang were just a handful of men. What if most of the other people had said, "no"? No, to herding their neighbors and friends into cattle cars, and torturing them in terror camps. No, to working people to death. No, to making people dig their own graves and shooting them at point-blank range to fall without reverence in these burial troughs. No, to silently enduring or going along with all of it. No!

My consciousness of mass brutality in the United States began in the 1960s with the TV pictures and sounds of what were the current events of my childhood. White men in uniform beating, fire-hosing, and loosing attack dogs on people who looked like me. Uniformed officers herding black children into police vans. White women standing on the lawns and at the doors of school houses shouting epithets at children who looked like me. White men dressed in civilian clothes beating and cursing grown-ups who looked like my mama and daddy. Children my age and older holding signs reading, "We don't want to go to school with them"—the children who looked like me. Throngs of white people standing on the sidelines—jeering, watching, cheering the abuse of people who looked like me.

I was raised in the example of people who said, "no." My maternal and paternal grandparents—children of parents born into the brutality of American chattel slavery—were among a cooperative of black Catholics who bought land in the early 20th century, and built their own churches in Washington, DC, so that they could sit in the sanctuary. My resolute, determined father publicly advocated for a local union of hotel and restaurant service workers back when trying to organize a union could cost you your life—whatever your skin color—and when many unions barred blacks from membership. I heard stories of my much-older siblings' defying "legal" segregation on the public buses and streetcars. My notorious mother habitually confronted, demanded, and obtained just ends from white authorities in the private, Catholic schools my older siblings attended, and from the all-white local police enforcers of discriminatory racial codes. "Stand up," was the theme of our family story. "Speak up even if you are the only one speaking!"

I wanted to raise children who would say, "No." A moral "no" of courage and resolution. A lonely "no," if necessary.

(Continued on back.)

Calendar

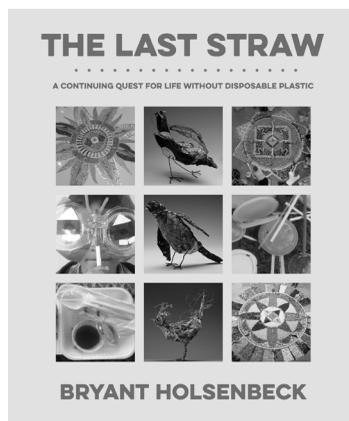
* = RCWMS events. For registration form and more information: www.rcwms.org.

*March 15–16, 2019, Fri., 7–9 pm & Sat., 9:30 am–3:30 pm
WHAT IF? A Writing Workshop with Carol Henderson
In a private home with a cat, Durham, NC
Leader: Carol Henderson is a writer, editor, workshop leader, and the author of *Losing Malcolm*, and *Farther Along: The Writing Journey of Thirteen Bereaved Mothers*, and editor of *Wide Open Spaces: Call Stories*.
More: www.carolhenderson.com
Cost: \$125. Register: rcwms.org/events/
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, events@rcwms.org

March 20–21, 2019, 1:30pm Wed.–1:00 pm Thurs.
WRITING TOWARD HEALING: A workshop with Carol Henderson
Well of Mercy Chapel, Hamptonville, NC
Through writing in response to prompts in this safe environment, we will gently reflect, remember, and reconsider. We will honor our lives and loved ones, re-imagine our experiences, and discover inner resources.
Leader: Carol Henderson is a writer, editor, workshop leader, and the author of *Losing Malcolm*, and *Farther Along: The Writing Journey of Thirteen Bereaved Mothers*, and editor of *Wide Open Spaces: Call Stories*.
More: www.carolhenderson.com
Cost: \$135.
Register: rcwms.org/events/
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, events@rcwms.org

*March 23, 2018, 9:30 am–4:00 pm
WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE REST OF YOUR LIFE? A Retreat for Women in the Second Half of Life
In a private home with a cat, Durham, NC
Feminist Betty Friedan said, "Aging is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength." As we age, our priorities often change, we become more discerning, we seek ways we can be more authentically ourselves. Many of us ask: "Where can we be useful?" "What is our purpose?" "What does it mean to be wise?" "Who are we when we are not what we used to do?" Life is a constant process of refining who we are. This retreat will offer time to reflect on who and where we have been as women and the opportunities that open to us as we age. Come listen to your own heart and yearnings and to other wise women seeking authenticity and wholeness.
Leaders: Pat Boswell, a UCC minister, has worked in hospital chaplaincy, Hospice, and palliative care. Terry Moore-Painter, a retired hospital chaplain and UCC minister, used art and creativity in her work with oncology patients.
Cost: \$75, scholarship available. Please, bring a bag lunch. Snacks/dessert will be provided.
Register: rcwms.org/events/
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, events@rcwms.org

*March & April, 2019
DOING OUR OWN WORK: An Anti-Racism Seminar for White People
Part 1: March 28–31, 2019, Part 2: April 25–28, 2019
Thurs. 7–9, Fri. 9–5, Sat. 9–5, and Sunday 1–5
Durham, NC
An intensive seminar for white people who seek to deepen their commitment to confronting white privilege and challenging racism in all its forms. With more than 40 hours of "class time," Doing Our Own Work equips participants with the analysis, skills, and tools needed to be more effective anti-racist allies. This seminar provides a context for in-depth reflection,



learning, and dialogue as participants work to deepen their knowledge of systemic racism, offer each other support and accountability, grow beyond shame and guilt, and practice the skills of interrupting racism. Leaders: Melanie S. Morrison and Jax Lee Gardner
Cost: \$475. Scholarships available.
Register: rcwms.org/events/
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, events@rcwms.org

*April 11, 2018, Thursday, 7:00 pm
READING: *The Last Straw* by Bryant Holsenbeck
Pleiades Gallery, Durham, NC
Environmental artist Bryant Holsenbeck had long wondered where trash goes when we throw it "away." Realizing that what we discard never really goes away, she became concerned about all the disposable plastic that piles up in landfills and clogs our streams. Bryant began saying NO to single-use plastic, and she spent a year discovering ways to live without it. *The Last Straw: A Continuing Quest for Life Without Disposable Plastic* documents her journey and the creative alternatives she found. Free & open to public.

April 13–14, 2019, Sat. 9:00 am–Sun. 11:00 am
SPRING MIX: Art, Spirit, Nature, Rest
The Stable, between Durham & Hillsborough, NC
This women-only retreat welcomes you to explore! It allows the time and space we rarely give ourselves to explore, be curious, relax and have a little fun, all in a group of like-minded women. No art experience is required for this guided and exploratory retreat! All art materials are included.
Leader: Claudia Fulshaw is a graphic designer, artist, and retreat leader.
Register: claudia@artwanders.com or 919-306-2919.
Registration deadline: April 4, 2019

April 15–April 16, 2019
SYMPOSIUM ON WOMEN ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES
Gothic Reading Room, Rubenstein Library, Duke University, Durham, NC
Symposium will open with a keynote by Dr. Johnnetta Cole on April 15. Panels the next day will explore the social history significance of the Lisa Unger Baskin Collection.
Info: <https://library.duke.edu/exhibits/2019/baskin>

July 17–21, 2019
THE LEAP! Living in Excellence, Abundance, and Productivity
Villa Dora Mae, Jamaica
Why not take the LEAP and choose YOU! If designing a life that centers your well-being is something that interests you, gather with us on the beautiful island of Jamaica, and let's take this journey together. Living in excellence, abundance, and productivity is possible. This experience is designed to usher women into the fullness of the life they deserve. Tapping into our inner strengths, gifts and talents, we will embark on a path to redefining our individual freedom and representing our greatness in the world! In building this community let's walk with each other into a chapter that reflects our dreams, desires and passions. Let's LEAP together!
Leader: Kimberly Gaubault (McCrae) is an intentional lover of humanity and actively lives the self-care life about which she teaches and advocates. A survivor/victim of domestic violence and sexual assault, Kim advocates for other.
Contact: theleap2019@gmail.com.

*Weeks of Quiet & Writing:
May 5–12, 2019, September 22–29, 2019, January 2–9, 2020

Dispatches

“Dispatches from the Front” by Mindy Oshrain

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,

with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

—Adrienne Rich, “Natural Resources”

The past two years have been a daily barrage of news flashes portending the downfall of our democracy. Children torn from their parents, environmental disasters, global alliances threatened, people of color and immigrants attacked, neo-Nazis marching in our streets; the horrors just keep coming. Sometimes I want to turn it off, stop reading, stop watching. But I have a hard time letting go; this is a horrific accident in progress and my mind and heart fall victim to onlooker slowdown. I care about this pileup and I am involved.

How does one live through this without standing in the middle of the street every day shouting, “Attention! This is not normal!” or, alternately, burying your head in despair, feeling that nothing you do can possibly matter? How does one find a balance, have an ongoing, parallel life of work and family without feeling a sense of acquiescence? I have friends who say, “I just stopped watching, stopped paying attention. I can’t deal with it anymore.”

That is not an option for me. One of my family heirlooms is a letter written during WWII dated “Somewhere in France, Dec. 3, 1944,” from my Uncle Herb, written to my father on the occasion of his turning 13. It is a carefully crafted missive from the battlefield. One section reads,

A Fascist is your enemy. He may go by a different name. But he’s still a Fascist. You must fight him, you must hate him, you must know him. He preaches inequality of Man, racial intolerance, religious intolerance. He believes in lynching, in organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. He’s clever, insidious and underhanded. Watch him. He is the one great obstacle we have in our quest for a decent world. Your generation must eliminate him.

My inheritance, was not, as for others, to be china or silver. It was this letter, a dictum to be an activist, to be always aware and to take responsibility to eliminate evil. It was a mandate to become, in the words of my Uncle Herb, a “rabble rouser.” His wartime experience, my parents’ civil rights and anti-Vietnam war activities, shaped my worldview; this dovetails with the Jewish principle of Tikkun Olam, that we are compelled to “mend, heal or repair the world.” Yet there is no way to take on all the evil, to fix all the broken places, especially now. Pirkei Avot, the first written text of oral Jewish law, states, “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.” (2.21) When I am overwhelmed by the enormity of the destruction, I think of my sewing: a stitch here and there; I mend and repair when and where I can. Often, it doesn’t feel like enough, but it is what I can do.

I have attended marches. I write letters, both to Congress and the editors. I call my senators who don’t give a damn about my calls. I canvass and



register voters. But mostly, I write postcards, more than a thousand over the past year. Like my Uncle Herb, I have chosen to send dispatches through the mail as a means to heal the world. When I am angry, when I despair and when I need to just do something, anything, I write postcards. Postcards to Voters is an organization that coordinates friendly, handwritten postcards mailed to Democrats in nationwide races for progressive candidates up and down the ballot. The constancy of writing, the everyday availability of this action is invaluable for me. It has become part of my mindfulness practice, to be in the moment yet working for change.

These postcards feel like a saving grace, literally, grace, for me. I find solace and constructive action in writing and creating. They are a small attempt, a plea, to another soul, “Please vote! Save our democracy!” They are my paper ammunition in this war inside our own borders. I want to write, “I beg of you to vote. Lives depend on it. The future of the planet depends on it.” I want to invoke the words of my Uncle Herb, a call for moral action. Instead, I settle for stickers and colored markers and the hope that humor and beauty and creativity will touch someone’s heart, allowing them to feel the importance of their voice and their vote. I know that many feel their votes don’t matter, through suppression, disenfranchisement, fraud or hopelessness. These cards are an attempt to shine a ray of light, of hope, into that darkness. They are my one stitch at a time.

I picture my postcards sitting in mailboxes across the country, hoping the bright colors and hand-placed stickers will tell someone “I see you, and I care.” I do believe they are effective, or I would not continue. Although there are no calculations regarding the efficacy of Postcards to Voters, other organizations doing similar work have impressive statistics. Locally, Stamp NC Blue targeted 5 districts in NC. For the primary, in May 2018, Stamp NC Blue volunteers (myself included) sent two rounds of “get out the vote” postcards to 6,256 voters prior to the May 2018 primary election. That resulted in twice the voter turnout compared to the May 2014 primary election. (<https://www.stampncblue.org/2018/07/24/double/>) And two small studies in Virginia showed that handwritten notes increased turnout by 0.4%, compared to the typical get out the vote canvass number of 0.3%. When elections are won and lost by single digits, this can make a difference.

These cards have been a critical way for me to survive these past two years. They help me find balance. In writing them, I am part of a nationwide community striving to make change. Even though I mostly write in solitude, I am aware that others are also out there writing as fast as they can. Social media for this group provides inspiration and solace, a community of like-minded souls who are having fun and taking action. Groups, mostly women, have formed nationwide to send postcards. There is a sense of accomplishment after spending a couple of hours on a weekend afternoon with ten folks around a table, then mailing out a hundred postcards. I’ve made small business cards about Postcards to Voters and handed them out at marches, talking to anyone I meet about this opportunity. In her essay, “Winter Hours,” the poet Mary Oliver writes of a time of darkness of nature, event and spirit. She suggests that, rather than fighting this with the “light of reason,” perhaps it is hope, which is our best weapon. Hope, she writes, “is more active and far messier than faith must be.... Hope, I

(Continued on back page.)

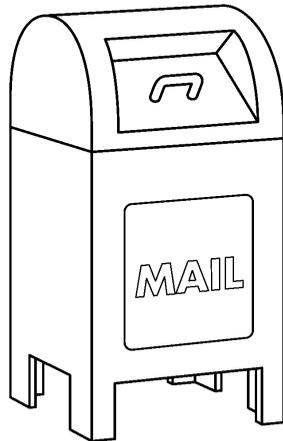
Courage...

These days, I often stand in the public square with strangers who I suppose are like-minded and with members of my own Unitarian Universalist faith community, wondering what call we are answering. I wonder about the names some of us call our opposition—imbeciles, idiots, assholes—and I wonder how we justice warriors of faith reconcile such feel-good behavior with affirming and promoting the worth and dignity of every individual. Are we in the streets, or writing letters, or making calls out of determination to create Beloved Community; or to vent anger, to shame, and “win” against the people whose ideas we oppose? If we “win,” will we otherize, marginalize, and punish the people who do not see the world as we do? Or will we do the arduous, wrenching heart-work of recognizing them as constituents of a human family where there are no “others” or “outsiders”—even as we vigorously resist and repudiate the pernicious and divisive ideologies we believe they stand for? Will we say “no” to the tar-and-feathering of people who disagree with us?

I have been in forums where my white brothers and sisters speak—as I believe they should—of trying to humanize or understand white acquaintances, friends, and relatives who have bestowed the mantles of authority and power on Donald Trump, and men and women like him. And I wonder if my white family members have tried equally to understand the terror and suffering of those black and brown humans outside white churches and white communities who are adversely affected by the ideas and practices of Trumpism. Will privileged white justice warriors say “no” to categorizing as political the immoral dehumanization of the marginalized?

We are of a culture that discounts human beings the farther they are from the markers of white, heterosexual, male, well-off, and professed Christian. When I stand and march at social justice events with members of my human family who are not like me—especially those at the highest pinnacles of preference—I find myself wondering whether if the “legal” authorities come for me, for my children, for my grandchildren; if they come for non-white people who cannot make themselves safe by remaining silent; if they come for the marginalized who choose to out themselves as non-hetero or gender non-conforming, or Jews, or Muslim, or some other category of non-preferment—who will be with us then? Who will shout, “No!”?

Joan F. Tilghman is a retired lawyer whose ancestors were born into chattel slavery in Prince George’s County, Maryland. She is a woman of faith working at becoming a better mother, grandmother, citizen, and builder of beloved community. She lives in Durham, North Carolina, and is a member of the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.



Dispatches...

know, is a fighter and a screamer.” And I am hopeful; postcards are a way I keep hope, and action, alive.

I also try to remember that in our country, people of color, Indigenous peoples, have suffered through colonialism, slavery, and their aftermaths for hundreds of years. If they haven’t given up, neither will I. Fascism by any name is the enemy not of the individual, but of a generation. Pushing the boulder uphill, unlike lonely Sisyphus, moving the mountain slowly, takes all of our shoulders against it. When I have done just one small thing, written my four or five postcards that day, my sincere, handwritten appeals on behalf of democracy, I believe that I am doing what I can in this moment. We each have to find our own way to repair the shattered places, stitch together the ragged edges where we have been torn apart. There are many ways to be of service in healing the world: to turn anger into a clarion call, to fight to hold on to hope, to shout, “This is not normal!” using rainbow pens, colored stickers, cards and stamps.

Mindy Oshrain is a psychiatrist practicing in Durham, NC and is a proud rabble rouser for democracy.

RCWMS

RCWMS is a forty-one-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 E. Rhodes & Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, Vanguard Charitable, Inavale Foundation, Emerald Isle Realty, A-Squared Fund of Triangle Community Foundation, and Community Foundation of Western NC.

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ISSN 0890-7676
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