

Elder Women - Leaders

Anita McLeod first became interested in elder issues while attending workshops on menopause. She was frustrated that presenters so often described aging as a process of “disintegration and deterioration.” “I’m not disintegrating! I feel better than I’ve ever felt in my life!” she says. In response, she decided to bring women together to talk about their personal experiences of menopause. After leading workshops on menopause for a decade, she turned her attention to the next stage of life, elderhood. Using her background in nursing and health promotion, and her training in workshop facilitation, Anita began to develop RCWMS’s Elder Women Program. She grounds this work in teachings she absorbed during a Vision Quest with the School of Lost Borders. There she learned to value the wisdom of elders and the gifts they have to bring to their communities.

Anita has designed the Elder Women Program to focus on consciousness raising and to offer an alternative to our culture’s habitual perspective on aging. She describes her work as helping women to embrace their elder years as “a time of deepening, of growth and continued learning, a time to look back on life and to pass along what has been learned.” In her work with elder women she has found that they are hungry to share their stories. “It’s not about information. They are hungry for deep community, where they can hear each other’s stories.”

In her elder years, Anita has rediscovered a sense of the sacred in nature, which has become a great source of nourishment and grounding for her. She finds life being out in nature--sailing, camping, or hiking. Anita also loves gathering women in circles to share or sit in silence. “There is a presence in the center that is palpable to me.” The sense of connection and oneness that she has discovered in nature and in the circle form the core of her work with other elder women.

“It’s women’s willingness to speak and share at a very deep level, their willingness to be vulnerable and courageous that moves me. “It’s such a gift and a privilege to be part of that.”

Betsy Barton has long been interested in “educating vulnerable populations about unpopular health topics.” She has been a part of the social justice community since she was young, working on issues such as education for those living with HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. These concerns led her to pursue a Masters in Public Health from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. But it was not until she became the main caregiver and advocate for her sister in her journey to death that Betsy understood end of life care as her particular vocation.

After her sister’s passing, Betsy accepted a job at the Institute for Care at the End of Life at Duke Divinity School. This enabled her to delve deeply into end of life issues. During this time, she developed a workshop series based on the Institute’s toolkit, “The Unbroken Circle.” The toolkit aims to help congregations develop support networks for those facing illness, end of life, and grief. Betsy’s accompanying four-part workshop is offered around the country, including by Project Compassion in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Death and dying is like childbirth, she says, “no one can tell you how to do it.” This mystery is part of what draws Betsy to these issues. “What I really love about this work is that it is very individual. It is individual for each person and at each particular moment.”

Betsy has served as a panelist in the End of Life Series offered by the RCWMS Elder Women Program. She challenges workshop participants to understand end of life issues beyond medical scenarios and concerns, and instead encourages them to use their reflections on death and dying to focus on how they can live more fruitfully now.

Betsy has participated in an intensive yearlong program, “Heavenly Messengers: Awakening through Illness, Aging and Death.” The program is based on Buddhist teachings and hosted by Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, CA.

“Death is what makes life interesting,” she says, “this work has deepened and focused my spiritual life, and increased my sense of gratitude exponentially.”

Betty Wolfe finds joy in movement and the body’s intuitive ways of knowing. Her work is about returning this joy to her clients. After working as a certified biofeedback practitioner for nearly thirty years, Betty found that the Feldenkrais Method could offer additional tools for people to learn about their bodies and become independent in their care. She became a certified Feldenkrais instructor in 2006. Through her private practice, Lessons with Ease, Betty offers Awareness Through Movement (ATM) sessions and biofeedback services.

Betty describes Feldenkrais work as functionally oriented, “it’s about how you organize yourself to lift something, or to go upstairs, or to get in the car, or to garden, because these are all the times that we end up hurting ourselves and then patterns perpetuate.” ATM sessions, part of the Feldenkrais Method, offer a unique opportunity to mindfully engage with the body. She describes each class as a kind of “individual research lesson,” which presents participants with movement puzzles. Participants are asked to pay attention to how they respond to these challenges—both physically and emotionally. “There are so many layers of learning in doing a lesson like this.” The goal is for participants to learn how their bodies can integrate movement that “is easy, and enjoyable, and safe. And you are not waiting for pain to tell you that you’ve done something wrong.”

Betty has taught the “Reaching Your Future with Ease” workshop through the RCWMS Elder Women Program. The three-hour workshop encourages participants to be mindful of how they perform reaching movements and whether these may be perpetuating pain. “For aging women, the joy of these lessons is to begin to experience these new ways of moving.”

Carolyn Toben describes herself as a messenger, carrying the message “to come home to

ourselves.” Carolyn’s deep relationship with the earth and its wisdom has long been a part of her life, particularly as she has cared for and learned from her land at the Timberlake Earth Sanctuary. This 165-acre refuge, located near Greensboro, NC, brims with wide wildflower meadows, pine forests, ponds, and creeks. It is laced with trails, which invite visitors to immerse themselves in the land. Carolyn’s long-time friendship with Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest and ecotheologian, further encouraged her trust in the land as teacher. She has written about their friendship in her book *Recovering a Sense of the Sacred*. She continues to share the richness of Berry’s writings and thoughts with others through workshops she leads at Timberlake.

Carolyn believes that only when we learn to truly love the earth will we find our way out of the environmental crisis. In 2000, she founded The Center for Education, Imagination, and the Natural World, dedicated to helping children learn to cherish and live in communion with the earth. Originally housed at Timberlake, the Center has now moved to Greensboro, NC, though many of its events still take place at Timberlake so the peace and beauty of the land can be a part of program experiences.

Carolyn shares Timberlake with RCWMS when she leads the “When Grandmothers Speak, The Earth Will Heal” Workshop for the Elder Women Project. The workshop was born of her intense desire for women to live into their unique role as caretakers of the earth by passing on their wisdom and love of the natural world to their grandchildren, and all children. In this way, the workshop fits into her mission to help children grow in their knowledge of the earth. During the workshop women are encouraged to remember what they know about and have lived in their relationship with the earth. They go on an “earth walk” with guides from the Center’s children’s programs and experience nature through various activities they can share with the children in their lives. During the workshop participants are encouraged to write prayers. Inspired by this practice, Carolyn is working on a book of prayers from grandmothers to grandchildren.

Lyndall Hare lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, but her interest in working with elders began during childhood in South Africa where her parents ran a nursing home. She recalls spending hours there, listening to residents’ stories. “It became a delightful place to visit as it gave me an audience with undivided attention.” Later, studying social work in university, Lyndall began to understand herself as an activist for the elderly, advocating for those who are silenced when shunted into nursing homes or assisted living facilities. “We as a society in the US don’t do a great job of incorporating our elders into our community,” she says, and calls this a great loss. Elders need to be heard in our communities, their wisdom needs to be shared. Lyndall sees conscious aging as a movement to bring these voices back into the world.

A spiritual perspective permeates Lyndall’s work on conscious aging. She works as an eldercare coach for adults who find themselves taking care of aging parents. In this role, she focuses on the spiritual needs of both caretakers and their parents, using Jungian Archetypes to enrich understandings of challenging situations and changing relationships. Lyndall also works through the Respite Center in Charlotte, North Carolina, to host workshops about conscious aging, such

as “Entering Crone-hood – a Rite of Passage,” and “Conversations about Positive Aging.” These workshops help participants understand aging not as decline, but as growth into deeper wisdom and an opportunity to act as mentors and wisdom keepers in our world.

Lyndall has led The Art of Aging workshop for the RCWMS Elder Women Program. She uses imagery, writing, guided meditations, contemplative practices, and stories to enrich participants’ experience and stimulate conversation. “I’ve personally learned that there is a hunger for these conversations. I am just a creator of the space.”

“My own aging has become a rite of passage into a more spiritual life with more contemplative practice,” she says, bringing her “a deepening and peacefulness which I didn’t expect.”

Pat Webster has a private psychotherapy practice in Durham and in Oriental, NC. After completing a degree in nursing, Pat received her doctorate in clinical psychology, focusing on the intersection between spirituality and psychology. In an effort to bridge these worlds she attended the Mystery School with Dr. Jean Houston where she learned about the mystical traditions of the world’s religions. “This was one of the greatest gifts of my life,” she says. She was particularly drawn to traditions that focused on nature as a teacher, such as Native American spirituality. “There’s something that happens in nature, where nature turns into the teacher. For me in my own personal growth and experience, this deepens the work that gets done.” Pat has continued to explore Native American spirituality in her personal life and practice and has taken several vision quests.

After an intensive vision quest experience with The School of Lost Borders, Pat felt “bursting with energy and a desire to serve and share” the depth and richness that Native American spirituality has brought to her life. “Native Americans have this saying, ‘for all my people.’ We don’t just go do this as some lone, solo journey . . . the gifts that are given to us need to be for our tribe.” After Pat shared this desire with Anita Macleod, Anita invited her to lead a workshop for the RCWMS Elder Women Program.

This invitation turned into the “Our Nature, In Nature” workshop. Though the workshop does not offer a vision quest per se, Pat calls it a series of mini vision quests based on the Native American Four Shields teachings. Workshop participants turn to nature as teacher and guide, spending time together on the land at Timberlake Earth Sanctuary near Greensboro, NC. For Pat, the workshop has reaffirmed the depth and wisdom elders have to share, and through it she feels she has found another part of her tribe.

Pat believes that our culture tries to scare our elders and shut them up, when an important task of elderhood is to speak. “It is not good for us to shut up, it is not good for us to live in fear. It is good for us to live our energy the way we have it. . . . Our task is to hand on our wisdom, and make our life experience something that can be used in carrying on life as we prepare to leave it.”

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For the **Rev. Liz Dowling-Sendor**, writing is sacred. She finds the Holy Spirit calling us to ourselves as we put words on a page.

While raising her children, Liz worked as a freelance writer and editor, writing for newspapers, magazines, and textbooks. In her elder years, her love of writing has only grown. "As I've gotten older, I realize that I've lived through so many things, and I have a lot of stories to tell." In the "Harvesting Our Stories" workshop, Liz inspires other elder women to discover the richness of their own lives through writing. She has found that elder women in particular often feel a great need to write. "There is this sense that you don't have a lot of time left, coupled with the richness you've lived in your life, so you just want to tell your story. I think it's a great impulse."

She has found that though many women come to the workshop thinking they do not have much to share, they often discover they truly “have done amazing things, even just in their relationships with friends.” At the heart of the workshop is the joy participants experience when they “get to dig deeper into the soil of their lives and see what’s down there. We’re not trying to be Pulitzer Prize winners,” she says, “we’re just trying to speak our hearts.”

Beyond the richness of the stories shared, Liz feels a great sense of community growing among participants in the writing circles. The trust they exhibit when they share their stories is palpable. “It always feels like holy ground, that someone in this group has been brave enough to share one of their stories. It’s that incredible sense that they trust all of us when they read their writing to each other.” Beyond the workshop, participants are free to use their writing as they wish, to keep for themselves, share with families, or develop further.

Liz describes the experience of a writing circle as “powerful, and sacred, and holy. It’s really an experience of the holy.”

As a young woman, **Sharon Thompson** became interested in law as an effective tool for social change, especially in addressing issues of women’s and gay rights. Today she continues to work in these areas at NicholsonPham Law Firm in Durham, North Carolina. She feels that educating people is an important part of her work and is glad that she has information that can be useful to others.

Sharon brings lessons learned from her own experiences into her work. Caring for both of her parents at the end of their lives motivated her to share information professionally about wills and planning for end of life care. “I’m aging now with my clients, and I’m finding that a lot of my clients are really at a period where they are reevaluating and realizing that the end of life really is going to come around the corner, and we really need to spend a little time thinking about it.”

Sharon shared her expertise in this area as a panelist for the End of Life Series in the RCWMS Elder Women Program, where she spoke about estate and health care planning. “What was particularly compelling [about the workshop] was to do it in a more personable way... in a context of women really sharing the feelings that are coming up around planning and their estate and so forth.” During her session, she encouraged participants to role-play conversations with family members about decisions that might be difficult to discuss, such as estate distribution or power of attorney. Sharon encourages women to deal with these tough questions sooner, rather than waiting for a tragedy. “There are so many myths and misconceptions around estate issues, and dying, and inheritance. I think people really welcome the opportunity to learn about that.”

Sharon has felt inspired by the Elder Women Program’s affirmation that we don’t have to deal with these issues alone. “I admire women’s resilience and courage to identify their issues and face them and do something about them, rather than hide your head in the sand... This is

important and needs to be dealt with, as scary as it is, but other people are struggling with those same things.”

Sherylyn Pitt is a psychotherapist and an ecotherapist. She holds a Master of Social Work from UNC Chapel Hill and is a licensed clinical social worker and addictions specialist.

She began offering and creating retreat and workshop experiences in her teen years and has always been fulfilled and energized by gathering circles of diverse people with a primary focus on the Sacred in the Natural World. A grandmother and an elder, she is dedicated to modeling consciousness and to supporting a healthy, healing, reciprocal relationship between humans and the earth, her work has spanned the last three decades providing mental health / addiction treatment and continuing education to professionals in the behavioral health field. Her clinical focus has been spirituality, trauma, grief, addiction and behavioral health care offerings to a wide variety of ages and populations. She integrates ecotherapy, the arts, mindfulness, eco-contemplation, somatic, spirituality, ritual, indigenous council circle, cognitive behavioral therapies, feminism and social justice models into her therapy practice in the Triangle of NC.