

South of the Garden

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

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Harvest

by Rebecca Welper

The okra plants tower majestically above the truck. The squash vines twine voluptuously around the walls of the truck bed, spilling onto the tires. Eager pink beet shoots peek up from the soil. This has been my garden experiment this year: a raised bed in the back of my husband's pickup truck. He came up with the idea in the spring, when we realized we'd be stuck at home for a good long while, and I needed a project. We knew we'd never get enough sun for vegetables in our oak-shaded yard, so he said, "Why not go to the sun?"

I ordered way too many seeds for the 4'x6' space. My hubby outfitted the truck bed with a layer of gravel for drainage, and an erosion mat. I shoveled in compost and decomposing leaves from our yard. I finished it off with a layer of top soil, and parked it in a sunny spot in front of some nice neighbors' home.

I enlisted my four-year-old as co-farmer, planting cucumbers, green beans, crookneck squash, Minnesota midget melons, basil, and more. Before we knew it, we had an honest-to-goodness garden. On days it doesn't rain, we fill up buckets with our hose, load up my kiddo's stroller, and roll water to the veggies. We pick off old, yellowed leaves, look out for nibbling insects, say hello to curious neighbors, and gather our small but wonderful harvest. My hungry little co-farmer's favorites have been the "cukes"—which rarely stayed on the vine long enough for the rest of us to enjoy.

Gardens always come with surprises. I thought the vines taking over the truck were melons, but they started producing white little knobby things, which became cuter and more pumpkin-like by the day. They turned from white, to yellow, to marbled orange, and maxed out at about 3.5 inches across.

My mom loved her garden, and while I don't recall her growing decorative gourds, she always let me pick out baby pumpkin gourds from the grocery in the fall. For some reason, I've found them irresistibly cute since I was young. During a summer of unrest, of being cooped up and anxious about the world beyond our little bubble, of wondering how my child is faring and how I could possibly mother her well enough through all of this, I like to think of these surprise mini pumpkins as a little gift from my own late mother.

We all need nurturing and connection, now more than ever. Join us in October for *Homegrown: NC Women's Preaching Festival* (this year as a virtual conference), and throughout the fall for writing workshops, anti-racism courses, and monthly gatherings on the ministry of Black women's self-care. Once again we're partnering with the non-partisan organization You Can Vote to make sure folks are registered and able to cast their ballots in this most-important election. Let's see what we can all harvest together.



Drawing by Nuria Garay
Del Barrio © 123RF.com

Lullabying

by Sarah Swandell

[Note: This essay won first place in the 2020 RCWMS Essay Contest. Read about the winners on the back page.]

They said the mothers were lullabying, *Hands up please don't shoot me, hands up please don't shoot me*, all of them in shirts the color of caution signs, a line of gold against a line of police. A wall of women, a shield of breasts, they were there to protect Black Lives Matter protesters. Facemasks lightly muffled their song.

I have been lullabying to my daughter nightly for the past five months of her short life. *Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness*. Her plump hands bat at the air like she's breaking through cobwebs. Her feet kick at her sleep sack. *Allelu, alleluia*. It is 2020, and though the country is splintering, there are still crib sheets to strip and bedtimes to keep.

Five months of nights have taught me what it means to lullaby: Behind every lullaby is adoration, and a plea that the child will rest in peace.

They said the mothers were lullabying—but just because it's a mother who's singing does not make a song a lullaby. What came from the mouths of that wall of women wasn't a song for sleeping. It was singsong teasing, to the tune of nana-nana-boo-boo, *Hands up please don't shoot me, hands up please don't shoot me*, the note held longest on the word *shoot*. Not a lullaby, not a hushing, but what you sing too close to your brother's ear in the backseat on the drive to Florida, breath hot and unavoidable. It's what you sing because you're stuck with your brother, and you have to say something. You have to provoke.

I first lullabied to a baby in my first pregnancy, the one I pictured as a boy. While his tiny cells were splitting I flitted around the house singing, *I get to be the one to hold your hand. I get to be the one*. Everything glowed golden. The future was full and light.

But soon I was bleeding and sitting on the bathroom floor, asking was I a mother, did this count, can this be happening—and though when you are suffering, everything narrows to a prism that ends in your suffering, somehow there on the bathroom floor I thought of others' suffering too: the infinitely greater suffering of Black mothers whose Black sons were lost long after their tiny cells had gathered into limbs and lungs and fragile necks.

Where were all the white women who had lost children, I wondered, and why didn't we band together with Black women to stop the losing of children (or at least try)? Why aren't all the bereaved banding together? What couldn't we do, what couldn't we stop? This is what I asked as the cool of the tile seeped through my jeans and my face buzzed and my sobs slowed. I imagined a mass of grieving

(Continued on back.)

Calendar

* = RCWMS events. More info: rcwms.org/events.

Sept. 1, 2020 & all Tuesdays, 11:30 am–12:30 pm (Zoom)
TUESDAYS WITH TILLIS, Weekly Protest Rally
Nonviolent community of resistance meets weekly for education, support, and action. All are welcome.
More: tuesdayswithtillis.org, jmwheele52@gmail.com

September 1–December 31, 2020, one day or overnight
SOLO WANDERINGS!

The Stable, private retreat near Durham, NC
Self-guided retreats. Art materials, instructions, and snacks provided for hands-on, creative journey. Safety precautions observed. Best for ages 12 and up. Leader: Claudia Fulshaw, is a graphic designer & artist
Cost: \$75–\$100 for retreat; overnight additional
Contact: artwanders.com or claudia@artwanders.com

*Sept. 8, 2020, Tuesday, 11:30 am–1:30 pm (Zoom)
ART OF CONSCIOUS AGING: A Group for Women
Contact: RCWMS, info@rcwms.org

September 10, 2020, Thursday, 7:00–8:00 pm
FROM HERE TO EQUALITY (Regulator Facebook live)
A Conversation with Prof. William "Sandy" Darity and Kirsten Mullen, co-authors of *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the 21st Century*
Sponsor: Regulator Bookshop, Durham, NC. Free.

*Sept. 10, Oct. 8, Nov. 12, 2020, Thursdays, 11-12:30
COFFEE & CONVERSATION with Lisa Baron (Zoom)
Take time to engage in conversation with one another. Each workshop will include time for conversation, reflection, and writing. Sign up for one or more.
Sept. 10: *What Can Introverts and Extroverts Teach Each Other During A Pandemic?*
Oct. 8: *How Can I Get Better at Living in the Moment?*
Nov. 12: *Holidays During A Pandemic*
Leader: Lisa Baron, social worker, writer, & facilitator
Cost: \$25 per week. Register: www.rcwms.org/events

*Sept. 13, 20, & 27, 2020, Sundays, 2:00–5:00 pm
THE NINE ENNEAGRAM TYPES: An In-Depth Panels Workshop, with Sandra Smith (Zoom)
Explore the Enneagram System by listening to panels of the 9 types. The Enneagram will come alive as we discover the parts of ourselves that can relate to each type. This workshop is an introduction to this system; participants need not know their Enneagram type.
Leader: Sandra Smith, MDiv, is a certified Enneagram teacher in the Narrative Tradition.
Cost: \$75. Register: www.rcwms.org/events

*Sept. 15, Oct. 20, Nov. 17, Dec. 15, 2020, 7:30–8:30 pm
THE MINISTRY OF BLACK WOMEN'S SELF-CARE: A Series with Kim Gaubault
Self-care is too often an intervention after a crisis rather than a preventative measure. If we allow our bodies, minds, and spirits to break down in the course of doing our work, we not only put ourselves at risk, we risk the integrity of our work. This series will offer practical tools for everyday self-care to Black women-identified individuals doing all forms of ministry, in church and community.
Sept.: *Take Me to the Water: Renew, Restore, Refresh*
Oct.: *In the Safety of My Sisters: Healthy Concepts of Sisterhood in Action*
Nov.: *We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting for*
Dec.: *Ethics of Community Care: I Am My Sister's Keeper*
Leader: Kimberly Gaubault (McCrae) is an intentional lover of humanity and actively lives the self-care life about which she teaches and advocates.
Cost: \$10, \$25, or \$40 per session. Sign up for one or all 4 sessions. Register: www.rcwms.org/events



September 16, 2020, Wednesday, 4:00–5:15 pm
LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD with SONG
Panel discussion about the history of Southerners on New Ground (SONG) and intersectional justice struggles. Mandy Carter & Mab Segrest (SONG co-founders), Wesley Hogan, and Lisa Levenstein. Free.
More: library.duke.edu/rubenstein/bingham/news

*September 17, 2020, Thursday, 7:00–8:00 pm (Zoom)
READING from *Play On!* by author Judy Dearlove
Follow Maxine, the hero of *Play On!*, as she gathers an eclectic band of buddies from her retirement community and a few eccentric young people for an adventure that becomes part cat-and-mouse caper and part soul-searching quest.
Sponsors: Regulator Bookshop and RCWMS
Order book: www.rcwms.org/publications
Reading is free. Register: www.rcwms.org/events

*Oct. 2, 9, 16, & 23, 2020, Fridays, 11:00 am–12:30 pm
KEEP ON KEEPING TRACK: Writing Toward Resilience in Challenging Times with Carol Henderson (Zoom)
This 4-session workshop will offer a safe place to explore our fast-changing world and the rush of feelings that are constantly rising within us.
Leader: Carol Henderson is a writer and workshop leader. More: www.carolhenderson.com
Cost: \$75. Register: www.rcwms.org/events

October 6, 2020, Tuesday, 4:00–5:15 pm
READING by Sallie Bingham
Sallie Bingham will read from her biography about Doris Duke as well as her new book: *Treason, A Sallie Bingham Reader*. Free.
More: library.duke.edu/rubenstein/bingham/news

*Oct. 6, 13, 20, & 27, 2020, Tuesdays, 2–3:00 pm (Zoom)
POETRY ACROSS BORDERS with Dr. Linda Ehrlich
With an emphasis on Japanese, Chinese, and Middle Eastern poetry, this series offers a chance to explore, read, and even try your own hand at poetry from outside of familiar European traditions. Will include tanka, haiku, and zuihitsu from Japan, landscape painting and poetry from China, and Ghazals from the Persian/Urdu tradition. Focus is on women poets and ties between poetry and visual art.
Leader: Linda Ehrlich, PhD, has over 25 years of experience teaching, writing, and living around world. More about Linda: www.braidednarrative.com
Cost: \$40 (for 4-weeks) More: www.rcwms.org/events

October 7–Nov. 4, 2020, Wednesdays, 5:30–8:00 pm
FINDING FREEDOM: White Women* Taking on Our Own White Supremacy (via Zoom)
A 5-part online workshop aims to deepen individual and collective understanding of how we as white women are complicit with white supremacy. (Women, gender-nonconforming, nonbinary, trans people, mixed-race, and white-passing people of color welcome.)
Facilitators: Evangeline Weiss and Kari Points.
Cost: \$50–300, More: gobeyondconflict.com/events

*October 15–16, 2020, Thursday–Friday (via Zoom)
HOMEGROWN: NC Women's Preaching Festival
Theme: *Preach Like Pauli*
This year's Homegrown Festival will focus on preaching on justice and mercy. The legacy of preacher, lawyer, and writer Rev. Dr. Pauli Murray will provide inspiration for our time together.
Leaders: Donyelle McCray (Homiletics, Yale Divinity School), Nicole Williams, Karen Ziegler, Grace Hackney, Angie Hong, Maddy Reyes, Margie Quinn, Chelsea Yarborough, and Deborah Williams.
Cost: \$25–75. Info: www.ncwomenpreaching.com

*Future Weeks of Quiet & Writing 2021:
January 2–9, May 9–16, September 19–26

Friendship

by Rachel Sauls

Friendship: The Magical & The Mundane

“Friendship is being conceited for one another,” my friend suggested as three of us stretched out on her lawn, enjoying a socially distant picnic and the June heat. Her newly concocted definition was a response to the confidence that the other friend and I professed in her ability to achieve her wildest dreams. Sub-five percent acceptance rates to programs she will apply for in the future? No problem. As far as we are concerned, she’s got them all in the bag. I jotted my friend’s spontaneous definition of friendship into the notes page on my phone. I’ve spent the past few months thinking about friendship as the current RCWMS Anita McLeod intern, and this definition of friendship seemed as good as any other.

Over the past two months, I have interviewed nineteen people—all of whom identify as either women or non-binary folks—about the ways in which friendship functions in their lives. I talked with participants in a one-on-one format through Zoom and over the phone, chatting about some of their favorite people while I sipped on tea and typed notes. Many participants shared their own definitions of friendship. One defined friendship as a verb, “to be there for somebody even when it’s not convenient.” That rang a bell. I remembered an evening in college that followed a truly terrible day. My roommates sat with me on the floor of my dorm room. They worked hard to turn my tears into laughter, and once they accomplished that task, they ordered pizza. It wasn’t convenient for them to postpone their chemistry homework until midnight, but they were there and it mattered. Other participants echoed this definition through anecdotes. One participant described a friend who cared for her in practical and consistent ways following a stroke, assuming responsibilities for paperwork and scheduling while she healed. Several participants described the positive impact of friends who infused joy, laughter, and a little bit of wine into their lives in the wake of disappointments, divorces, or deaths. Convenience did not mark any of these interactions, but compassion did.

When I asked another participant how she would define friendship, she described the bond as “sisterhood,” invoking a familial term to emphasize a particular type of committed relationship between women. Another participant described friendship as relationships with people who have “proximity to [her] soul, [her] heart.” One participant asserted its criticality in her life. “For me,” she said, “[friendship] is a lifeline.”

Like many of the interview participants I spoke with, I am quick to identify the magic in friendships, and so I was unsurprised to discover scientific and sociological data affirming the positive benefits of friendships in our lives. Friendships excel at boosting our ability to manage stress, making us laugh, and teaching us to honor difference. And, as I learned from the interviews I conducted, the discourse and cultural expectations that we have created around friendship are also good at making us feel inadequate. Several participants raised concerns about the value of their contributions to my project before the interview questions even started. “I don’t know if I’m the best person for this interview,” one participant confessed. “I don’t have as many friends as other people.” A handful of her fellow participants echoed this fear. While friendships can be a source of empowerment and

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confidence, they can also amplify our self-doubt and insecurities. Several participants worried that if they had never captured the spotlight as the “popular” girl who always maintained enough friendships to fend off life’s loneliness, they were not adding value to my project. I tried to assure each participant that they and their contributions belonged in the conversation, but their doubts spoke to a larger theme within contemporary studies of friendship: the damaging influence of capitalism.

Writer and lawyer Ephrat Livni convicts us of transactional tendencies, writing, “We can quantify everything now—from our steps on Fitbit to our literary consumptions on Goodreads. As a result, we feel we must make everything and everyone count for something.” Questions of capitalistic tendencies and norms within friendships are particularly important in considering friendships between people with different identities and backgrounds. Many of the participants I spoke with emphasized the beauty and deep learning offered by friendships with people who have different life experiences from one another. Participants described intergenerational, interracial, and intergender friendships as particularly life-giving—and sometimes particularly challenging—relationships. One participant described the importance of interracial friendships that often require willingness to engage in uncomfortable conversations. From her perspective, friendship can be “a portal to be sensitive across gender, race, class, sexuality, all of that.” Another participant described intergenerational friendships as having the same value as friendships with peers, but a “different flavor.” While age gaps between friends can be beneficial—as they are for one participant who expressed, with great relief, that none of her friends golf—they can also create uncomfortable tension. Several elders noted their distaste for the maternal role they felt coerced to assume in friendships with younger people and the lack of nurturing they received in these friendships, while some young participants described their discomfort with feelings of deference and condescension they experienced in intergenerational friendships with women who are older. It turns out that friendships are not an oasis in which we can exempt ourselves from power dynamics and biases. Rather, friendships offer an invitation to dig more deeply into these realities, so that we might untangle our communities from pervasive injustices.

On the other hand, friendships are not a self-improvement course. While it may be tempting to idealize a friendship with someone who is marginalized in one or more ways as an opportunity to cleanse oneself of prejudices, the value of an intergenerational, interracial, and/or intergender friendship cannot be reduced to its functionality. When friendship is valued for its function, it ceases to exist as friendship. Friendships are not a substitute for unlearning ageism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, or binary conceptualizations of gender. In fact, one must already be on a journey toward unlearning these injustices and taking substantial action to create a more just world in order to fully delight in these friendships. While friendships can deepen our commitment to social justice work with urgency and understanding, they should not be weaponized as tools to muffle cries for justice or excuse inaction. Friendships can function both as sanctuaries and wilderness, protecting people from pain and further exposing them to injustices.

While I interviewed and took notes for this RCWMS project on friendship, I found myself struggling to wrap

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Lullabying...

moms, picturing us as one body, long before I saw the line of women in shirts like caution signs. I longed to see that power unleashed.

Because in loss, you aren't just sad. There is a fury. And it can overtake the world.

Eleven months later our second child became our firstborn. She entered a world of pandemic and protests and panic, and the same questions that came to me while miscarrying came to me while nursing, while soothing her to sleep.

I kept thinking of Black mothers.

When I would lift our daughter from her crib in the darkened bedroom, my mind would suddenly flash to the mother of George Floyd, four and a half decades back, lifting him from his crib and letting his little mouth find her breast by feel, by scent, in the dark. She had done these things too. She, too, had sung. And when the knee was on his neck it was her name on his lips.

Losing a baby, then birthing a baby, crystallized my place in the wall of women singing their provocations. I know now that even singsong teasing has its origin in lullaby. Its origin is in adoration of sacred human life, life that matters, but does more than matter—life that means the world.

We named our baby Olympia and decided her name was the smallest, sweetest song. *O-lym-pi-a*. Would we ever tire of saying it? And so I joined the line of mothers crooning to their babes, each sure their child's name was a song, a line that would be heard. The question was never whether I would tire of the lilting lullaby of my own child's name. The question was whether I would ever tire of saying the names of other mothers' children. The question was how to sing not to sleep, but to rouse a nation from slumber.

Well. I am part of that wall of moms now, and we have no choice but to chant till our voice grows hoarse, then sing each other's children home. Our only choice is to sing and sing and sing. *Phi-lan-do. Bre-on-na. George, George, George.*

Rev. Sarah Swandell is a writer, singer/songwriter, and ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. A 2015 graduate of Duke Divinity School, she spent five years in the partish and is now on full-time leave, caring for her infant daughter. Find her work online at sarahswandell.com.



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Friendship...

my mind around the fundamental nature of friendship. Is it magical? Does it help us rise above life's banalities and enter into a more exciting, authentic reality? Is it a radically inclusive way of relating to one another? Or is friendship mundane? Is it a burdensome conglomeration of disappointments? Does it function as a means of excluding people outside of its boundaries?

The folks I interviewed taught me that the answer is "yes." Friendship is magical and mundane—mostly, it seems, a mix of the two. The moments we spend sharing presence with one another are glimpses into the magic of the mundane, and, if we are fully honest with ourselves, some moments of friendship are marked by cruelty, too. So, what do we do? I think we show up. We warm blankets in the dryer when our friends are sad, and we drive four hours to be present on the surgery date, and we call our senators to demand that they stop hurting our friends. We send holiday cards, and we carve out time for togetherness, and we allow our connections to ebb and flow. If we are willing to trudge through the mundane with one another, I suspect we will find magic waiting for us there.

Rachel Sauls is a 2020 graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill and is an Anita McLeod Intern at RCWMS.



RCWMS is a forty-three-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 support from E. Rhodes & Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, Mike McLeod, Emerald Isle Realty, Inavale Foundation, and the Triangle Community Foundation.

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