

South of the Garden

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

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Relief

by Jeanette Stokes

I live in 100-year-old house, and while I've had it painted in bits and pieces over the years, I had never had the whole house painted at one time. So when I noticed that the front porch floor needed some repairs and a new coat of paint, I mentioned it to my spouse, who responded, "Let's paint the whole house." I dread large home projects, because they make such a mess, but I agreed, and we hired painters in October.

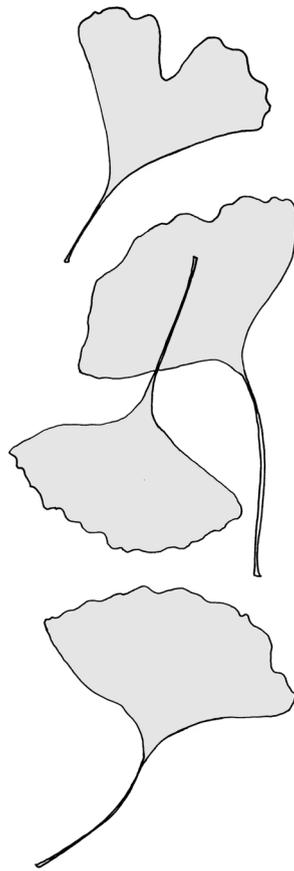
One of their first steps was to cover the inside of the windows with plastic to prevent paint chips and dust from coming into the house. So we spent almost three weeks sealed up in the house without being able to see the world outside. The translucent plastic let in some light, but I couldn't watch the leaves turning color from inside the house. On Halloween the whole front of the house was covered with a big sheet of plastic. We couldn't even open the front door. To hand out treats, I had to go out the back door, walk around the house, and sit in a chair on the front porch. One of the trick-or-treaters even commented that the house look haunted. It sort of did.

Having the windows covered felt a bit like living in a cave. The one benefit was that not being able to see out was good for my concentration. Fewer distractions. When the plastic came off the windows, I was so relieved. I could see the bright yellow ginkgo tree in the park next to my house and admire it for a few days before it lost its leaves.

The painters were still working on the house when Election Day arrived in early November. I had stopped listening to pundits and pollsters the week before the election, because I had decided they didn't really know anything. They're the same people who told us Hillary Clinton couldn't lose the presidential election in 2016. And their gloomy commentary just encouraged progressive people like me to think we had already lost. When the votes were counted, it turned out most of the experts were wrong. While I wasn't happy about the outcome in North Carolina, at least the rest of the country didn't tank. That was a relief.

I also felt relieved that election season was over. Constant news about Trump and the candidates he supported let up a bit. Never ending predictions that the Republicans were going to win both houses of Congress and most of the governorships stopped. I stopped being afraid to glance at the newspaper, listen to the radio, or check in with Facebook. Who benefitted from all those dire predictions, from the constant gloom and doom coming from most of the mainstream and progressive media? Advertisers? I hope someone figures that out and lets me know.

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Books

by Jeanette Stokes

Books make great gifts for others or entertainment for you. Here are some of the books RCWMS has published. Visit rcwms.org/publications for more.

Making the Road as We Go by Jeanette Stokes (2022) \$30. This is about how I got to be a feminist in religion. Follow the path from my childhood in Tulsa to Smith College during the Vietnam War, from seminary to the creation of RCWMS and ordination in the Presbyterian church. Learn about my evolving relationship with the church and my development as a feminist devoted to an expanded vision of faith and spirituality in the service of justice and equity.

Letters from Old Screamer Mountain by Melanie S. Morrison (2021) \$25. In 2012 Melanie stayed at the Lillian E. Smith Center on Old Screamer Mountain to write about the intergenerational legacies of lynching. While there she wrote these letters to her mother, whose young life had been changed by a winter weekend she spent with Lillian Smith, the white Southern author who wrote scathing critiques of white supremacy.

Flesh & Bones: Learning to Love This Body by Liddy Grantland (2021) \$25. Liddy's body hurts all the time. As a senior at Duke, she wrote about chronic pain for the school newspaper. In this intimate story of what her body teaches her about love, loss, and justice, Liddy offers an honest and hopeful vision for a world in which we all learn to love our flesh and bones.

Illusions of Innocence by Marcy Litle (2020) \$25. This courageous, inspiring, and deeply honest book explores the roots of racism in family stories and national myths. A balance between memoir and history, it engages with Black voices and invites white Americans to do the prickly work of re-examining "white innocence."

Play On! a novel by Judy Dearlove (2019) \$25. In pursuit of an improbable goal, Maxine gathers an eclectic band of bridge 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. Together, they follow their dreams with grace, great good humor, and skill.

The Last Straw: A Continuing Quest for Life Without Disposable Plastic, by Bryant Holsenbeck (2018) \$25. Environmental artist Bryant Holsenbeck wondered where trash goes when we throw it "away." Realizing it never really goes away, she worried about all the disposable plastic clogging our landfills and streams. This book is her NO to single-use plastic and her YES to creative alternatives.

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Calendar

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

*December 3, 2022, Saturday, 9:00 am–5:00 pm
WESTWARD HO! Explore the direction West while creating a Peace Pole

The Stable, Durham, NC

In 2022, the four seasonal Art Wanders retreats correspond with the four cardinal directions. This final retreat of the year presents a unique perspective on westward expansion, freedom, and opportunity while also remembering this was not the case for all. Fences were built to keep in and to keep out certain peoples. With a thoughtful and creative approach, we will metaphorically disassemble a fence and create a Peace Pole out of a 4x4 wooden post. Peace Poles were first created in response to the nuclear bombings with the inscription, "May Peace Prevail on Earth." They are "planted" in revered places as tangible ways to remind all of us to do our part in spreading peace throughout the land. No art experience is needed for this guided retreat. Included: Breakfast goodies, lunch, beverages and all materials to create your own Peace Pole with solar light and stake for "planting."

Leader: Claudia Fulshaw, artist & creative retreat leader.

Cost: \$150, Register: www.artwanders.com

Contact: claudia@artwanders.com

*December 11, 2022, Sunday, 1:00–5:00 pm

HOLIDAY SALE

1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC

Come by to visit, to look at our art, and to buy great gifts by Bryant Holsenbeck, Galia Goodman, BJ Fusaro, Jeanette Stokes, TheTravelPenguin, and more. Handmade cards, jewelry, books, and other art. Jeanette Stokes will be signing copies of her new memoir, *Making the Road as We Go*. Bring friends and family. A portion of all the sales will benefit RCWMS.

Contact: info@rcwms.org

*December 13, 2022, Tuesday, 11:30 am–1:30 pm

ART OF CONSCIOUS AGING: A Group for Women Meets monthly on the 2nd Tuesdays.

(Shared leadership on topics. Leadership is shared. Newcomers welcome. No fee to attend. No need to register. (via Zoom))

Questions: info@rcwms.org

December 15, 2022, 7:00 pm (3rd Thursdays)

TARA PRACTICE: Practicing the Sadhanas of the Twenty-One Taras with Rachael Wooten (via Zoom)

Drawing from her 2020 book, *Tara: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*, Wooten will offer teachings about Tara and lead a guided meditation.

Leader: Rachael Wooten, PhD, Jungian analyst, writer, Tibetan Buddhist dharma teacher, and author of *Tara: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*.

More on Rachael: rachaelwootenauthor.com

Cost: Free. More: www.bhumisparsha.org/events/

*December 21, 2022, 7:00–8:30 pm (3rd Wednesdays)

THE MINISTRY OF BLACK WOMEN'S SELF-CARE: A Series with Kim McCrae (via Zoom)

Allowing our bodies, minds, and spirits to break down in the course of doing our work puts ourselves and our work at risk. This series offers

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Drawing by Mary Margaret Wade

practical tools for everyday self-care to Black women-identified people in all forms of ministry, in church and community.

Leader: Kimberly (Gaubault) McCrae

Cost: \$10–\$40

Register: www.rcwms.org/events

December 28, 2022, Wednesday, 10:00–11:00 am

PASTORS FOR NC CHILDREN: Monthly Leaders Gathering (via Zoom)

Monthly gathering (on the 4th Wednesday) for faith leaders (clergy and lay) who are interested in supporting public education in NC from a faith perspective. Pastors for NC Children hosts these monthly gatherings on the fourth Wednesday to connect leaders from across the state to build a network to be able to bring justice (love of neighbor) and systemic change to the public schools and students they serve. We are a new nonprofit, so we are looking to connect with leaders across the state to spread the message about our work. Thank you for joining us!

Leader: Rev. Suzanne Parker Miller, Exec. Director

Info: PastorsForNCchildren.org or

PastorsForNCchildren@gmail.com.

Cost: Free

*RCWMS Weeks of QUIET & WRITING

Weeks led by Jeanette Stokes: January 2–9, 2023,

May 14–21, 2023, September 17–24, 2023

Week led by Carol Henderson: May 8–14, 2023

Contact: Jeanette at info@rcwms.org

ONGOING

DEMOCRACY OUT LOUD: Weekly Protest Rally (Formerly Tuesdays with Tillis)

Tuesdays, weekly, 11:30 am–12:30 pm EDT

Nonviolent community of resistance (via Zoom).

To register, email name to jmwheelee52@gmail.com.

MUSIC: TakeOut jazz with mahaloJazz!

Wednesdays, weekly, 5:30–6:30 & 7:00–8:00 pm EDT

The Eddy, Saxapahaw, NC

Join Alison Weiner for jazz every Tuesday evening.

Reservations highly recommended.

Info: The Eddy, 336-535-2010

FINDING FREEDOM: White Women** Taking on Our Own White Supremacy (via Zoom)

Dates available for 2023.

This 5-part online workshop aims to deepen our understanding of how we as white women are complicit with white supremacy. **All women, gender-nonconforming, trans, mixed-race and white-passing people of color welcome.

Cost: \$50–300.

Info and dates: www.wearefindingfreedom.org

SOLO WANDERINGS! Creative Retreats

The Stable, a private retreat in Durham, NC

Day or overnight options available. Self-guided offerings for one to four people. Supplies and snacks provided.

Leader: Claudia Fulshaw, artist & creative retreat leader

Cost: \$100 solo/\$65 additional person, plus overnight

Contact: artwanders.com, claudia@artwanders.com

Old Woman

by Becky Wall

Becoming an Old Woman

When the pandemic lock-down began in March of 2020, I was a brunette. My hair color, renewed every three weeks, was just what it had always been, except for some highlights I had added because I was beginning to feel a little ridiculous—is there such a thing as a seventy-three-year-old natural brunette?

I had just had the color redone on March 16, 2020, the last day before the COVID-19 lock-down began for me. Thanks to that timing, it was a while before I realized that I was going to have to do without professional hair coloring for an unspecified time. Then it came to me: I had been saying I wished I had let the color go natural before I grew my hair long, and now I wouldn't be seeing a lot of people for a while (perhaps two or three months, as we then thought). It was the perfect time to get past the "boy-does-she-need-to-get-her-roots-done" stage and begin growing the color out. With my volunteer work stopped and church gatherings moved online, I began saying that I might not be doing much else, but at least I was going to find out what color my hair actually was.

As it turned out (over two years later, not a couple of months), I like the way the grey has come in. My natural color is a mixture of white and dark grey, and I like the way the white frames my face. I also love not having to worry about roots, or sit for hours with smelly chemicals on my head. There's only one awkwardness, really, and it's not a problem, just a startling thing: Periodically, I catch a glimpse of my mother in the mirror. I loved my mother and I'm glad I look like her, but she was born in 1910, and I hadn't expected to become her contemporary.

But having grey hair was only the first of a number of pandemic changes that led me to the realization, not just the formal knowledge, but the inward realization, that I am now an old woman. I'm not being morbid—I hope to be old for quite a long time—but "old woman" is the category to which I now belong.

The way I see myself in the world has changed. Early in the pandemic, it was clear that there were huge social needs, and I felt I ought to help. The more I read and saw, though, the clearer it became that organizations like food banks didn't want volunteers over 65, and possibly the most important thing I could do was try not to catch the disease myself, not only for my own sake but to help conserve medical resources. It seemed very odd to say it, but staying in and protecting myself seemed to be my public duty.

So my husband and I stayed in, eating a truly unprecedented number of home-cooked meals. I remembered that I like to cook, and I learned how to do my grocery shopping online. My friends and I kept up our weekday morning walks (six feet apart), but yoga classes, tai chi classes, and workouts in the weight room of the Y all came to a sudden halt, and soon I began to feel weaker and almost frail. And with less exercise came more osteoarthritis. I began to catch myself leaning on banisters and doing other

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Illustration by Julia Ilana

things to take weight off my legs—ways of moving that once again reminded me of my mother.

But I don't feel old just because of this unfamiliar weakness. More important was coming to realize—to know—that I could very well die quite soon. In the earliest days of the pandemic, it seemed highly likely that if I caught the new disease I would die, and the official pleas to help "flatten the curve" seemed to imply that we were all going to catch COVID sooner or later. I don't mean that I was terrified or even fatalistic, but for the first time in my life, dying in the relatively near future began to seem rather likely. The fact that less exercise was making me feel frail just reinforced that realization.

And so I began to admit to myself something I had been avoiding: I was no longer even remotely middle-aged. Possibly 60 is the new 50, but 75 is not the new 60—anything, and modern medicine and ancient acupuncture can cure or alleviate only so much. My aches and pains are multiplying, and now I'm seriously worried about my vision. For these reasons and others, I have to figure out new ways to live and cope, and I need to attend to the tasks of this stage of life rather than try to pretend they aren't my current work.

Fortunately, I have some good role models. My mother and her siblings stayed active until their final illnesses began, and I had the good fortune to go to church for many years with a group of people who were mentally and physically active well into their later decades, like the retired religion professor, nearing 100, whose bookcases in his assisted living facility were filled with volumes in Greek and Hebrew. And then there was my master's thesis advisor, whom I used to see in the weight room at the YWCA when she was in her 80s. She was wiry and strong, and her conversation was as impressive as ever. When I first began taking her classes, she made a habit of lecturing with a cigarette in her mouth. The long-lasting physical and mental strength she attained by cultivating better habits was therefore particularly impressive.

So what is my current business? Dealing with physical changes is important, of course, and so is making sensible plans for the future, including the classic "getting my affairs in order." But I think it's even more important to cherish each day, to look long at fall leaves and spring flowers and sunsets and the ocean, to spend time with the people I love, to make good use of the bounty I have been given. Knowing that my remaining time is limited seems to be motivating me to make it count, not by staying busy but by looking and seeing and enjoying, making space for some of the things I have always loved and some of the things I newly love to do. The first verse of Psalm 90 has been echoing in my ears: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." I think it's time to figure out what that means, not to the ancient Hebrews but to me.

Becky Wall is a retired professor of English from Winston-Salem State, where she taught for four decades. A North Carolina native, she often researches and writes about her ancestors, both Quakers and others. She now enjoys cooking, knitting, singing, and hanging out with husband, Bill Allen.

Relief...

It seems that plenty of people were still angry about the Supreme Court's decision on reproductive rights. And they voted. Women voted in larger numbers than men. In some places women made up 58% of voters. Young people turned out in larger numbers than predicted. Our democracy didn't collapse. There appear to be more people who believe in freedom and equality than people who want to usher in a Trumpian fascist regime. That's a relief.

After this election, I'm going to go on believing that there are more people in this country who want to build up democracy than those who want to remake it into a white Christian nation. Yes, white supremacists and Christian nationalists worry me. Gerrymandering and voter suppression worry me. The current NC Supreme court worries me. And ongoing efforts to undermine justice and equality worry me. But at the moment I am going to be grateful that our fragile democracy has held together through one more election and pray that the leaders of this nation are serious about slowing fossil fuel production, about climate change, and about the staggering economic disparities in the land.

And I'm going to keep looking out the windows of my house and being grateful for this amazing planet that is our home.

Books...

The Tara Cards by Rachael Wooten (2020) \$35. These inspirational cards of the 21 Taras include a mantra, description, praise, and action for each Tara.

Just Keep Going: Advice on Writing and Life by Jeanette Stokes (2016) \$20. If you are struggling with your own writing, you might want to look at this book I wrote to help myself and others along.

Meinrad Craighead: Praying with Images, DVD, \$25. This classically trained artist explores feminine faces of the Divine and the numinous gifts of the natural world. Her art reflects her mystical experiences and invite us to examine our own inner lives and connection to the Divine.



Motherworld

Motherworld: A Devotional for the Afterlife, Destiny Hemphill (Action Books, 2023) Preorder: \$18, actionbooks.org/2022/11/preorder-motherworld/

"mama say this earth will outlive this world," Destiny Hemphill writes. In this gleaming collection she gathers what of this life might bloom into another. Through rituals, hymns, memories, murmurings, chants, and psalms, *Motherworld* convenes the women and waters whose routes mark an otherwise from the brutal arrangements of the here and now. This transformative practice is not for the faint of heart. Toni Cade Bambara asks: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well? . . . cause wholeness is no trifling matter." And here is a poet who answers with a resounding yes—her affirmation a root system, fortified by all the nourishment of blood and earth. Hemphill's motherworld shimmers with that brightdark joy that is grief's marrow. What luck and work to carry the instruction of these poems. I will be holding them close and pressing them into many hands.

—Claire Schwartz, author of *Civil Service*



RCWMS is a forty-five-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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