

South of the Garden

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

Volume 44, Number 4

December 2023

Winter

by Jeanette Stokes

It was a warm fall in North Carolina, or at least sprinkled with some warm days. I went swimming outside (in an unheated pool) for the last time on October 29, later in the season than ever before. Now it is November, and some of the trees have finally displayed lovely shades of red, yellow, and orange. It always makes me a little sad when the trees put on their bright show, because I know that soon the leaves will fall and the trees will be bare. In the meantime, I enjoy any excuse to drive in the countryside and drink in the fall colors.

Some of my friends report that they feel sad this time of year. I remind them that the natural world around us is dying, which reminds us of deterioration and death. It make sense that we humans might feel sad in response.

I fostered a beautiful white cat for five months. We kept him outdoors most of the time. While I enjoyed watching him frolic in the park next to our house, I worried every time he crossed the busy street in front of our house. After asking nearly everyone if they needed a cat, kind neighbors said they might. They invited the cat over to their house for a few days, which turned into a week and then two. Now Blanche the cat has found a home with them. I miss him, but the neighbors let the cat inside more and let him sleep on their bed.

This fall we have offered a variety of programs, including HOMEGROWN, an annual preaching festival, where we were inspired by the brilliant words of the Rev. Dr. Melva Sampson. We hosted a screening of *The Philadelphia Eleven*, a film about the first women ordained as Episcopal priests. About 125 people attended including two of the original eleven: Carter Hayward and Marie Moorefield Fleischer. We also hosted a tour of Historic Stagville, which now focuses on educating the public about the experience of the people who were enslaved there; held a weeklong writing retreat at the coast; offered a writing workshop with Shawna Ayoub and a sleep workshop with Betty Wolfe.

Check the Calendar for upcoming offerings. Of special interest is a December 7 reading by Shayla Griffin from her new book, *The Awesome Kids Guide to Race*. The book, published by Justice Leaders Collaborative, is a new comprehensive guide for parents, teachers, and curious kids of all ages. This beautifully illustrated picture book includes profiles of activists, simple explanations of concepts like race, racism, white privilege, implicit bias, and antiracism; an overview of racial discrimination and activism in the United States past and present; and a checklist of actions kids (and grownups) can take to change the world. You can order a copy from RCWMS for \$25 (includes tax and shipping) or from the publisher www.justiceleaderscollaborative.com/



Image credit: LNS/cpf

Writing

by Jeanette Stokes

As of this fall, RCWMS has hosted Weeks of Quiet and Writing at the North Carolina coast for twenty years. Marion Thullbery, our current board chair, always reminds me of the timing when I ask. She remembers because the first one closely followed a significant loss. Her mother died in the fall of 2002 and she came to her first writing week in early 2003.

The RCWMS writing program was created at the suggestion of Nancy Peeler Keppel, a former RCWMS trustee. She proposed that RCWMS could create a program for women to explore spirituality and creativity. She offered to contribute financial support and suggested we might start with women and writing. Nancy, then in her early seventies, had some money to share. She was part of the family that invented and still produces Cheerwine, a cherry-flavored soft drink popular in the South.

I figured Nancy would give us \$500 or \$1,000 to get us started with some workshops and possibly a retreat. She wrote us a check for \$1,000 in April of 2002, but then, much to my surprise, her family foundation (the Clifford A. & Lillian C. Peeler Family Foundation) gave us \$14,000 in June of that year. That was a whole lot more money than I had anticipated.

Since we had a chance to create a more substantial program than I first imagined, I enlisted two colleagues to help me imagine what we might do. Two writers, Margie Hattori and Mary Jo Cartledgehayes, were the perfect partners. Together, we came up with a list of things a writing program could offer, including:

- Writing retreats at the beach
- Workshops, classes, and local writing groups
- An annual essay contest
- Support for writers
- Publishing projects

Over the years Nancy's contributions to the writing program kept coming. Even after her death in 2004 her family's foundation continued to support us. Over a seven-year period, Nancy and the foundation contributed \$130,000 to the program.

Shortly after we launched this project, I began to want longer times away for writing, maybe a week. I wondered whether anyone would pay to go to the beach with me for a week just to be quiet and write. In 2003, I took a chance that they would and reserved Pelican House, a retreat house at Trinity Center, an Episcopal conference center on the North Carolina coast.

I stayed in Room Seven that very first week and relished a view of the beach and the Atlantic Ocean. I've stayed in that same room during every writing week since. It turns out that it takes a whole week for the outside world to slip away and for me to arrive at anything that feels like focus or concentration. Participants agree to keep silent during the day and

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Calendar

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

Now through December 3, 2023
MANDY CARTER: The Scientist of Activism
Rubenstein Library, Duke University, Durham, NC
Exhibit honors the long work of Mandy Carter, Durham, NC-based Black lesbian feminist activist, in the struggle for social justice, nonviolence, Black freedom movements, and queer liberation. Free and open to the public.

December 1, 2023, Friday 7:00–9:00 pm EST
BECOMING A NEW SAINT: Exploring the Path of Emerging as Warriors from Our Broken Hearts With Lama Rod Owens and adrienne maree brown
Hayti Heritage Center, Durham, NC
Saints, spiritual warriors, bodhisattvas, zaddikim—no matter how they are named in a given tradition, they all share a profound altruistic wish to free others from suffering. Saints are not beings of stained glass or carved stone. “Each of us can be a new saint,” says Lama Rod Owens. “In our pain, our trauma, and all our complexity, we all can—and must—awaken the virtue of our compassion for the benefit of our communities, our planet, and our own souls.”
Suggested donation: \$15
Registration: www.lamarod.com/TNSDurham

December 2, 2023, Saturday, 9:00–5:00 pm EST
MEDITATION RETREAT with Lama Rod Owens
Eno River Unitarian Universalist Church, Durham, NC
Cost: \$115 (includes Friday night)
Registration: www.lamarod.com/TNSDurham

December 7, 2023, Thursday, 7:00 pm
READING: *The Awesome Kids Guide to Race* by Shayla Reese Griffin
The author will read from *The Awesome Kids Guide to Race*, a new comprehensive guide for parents, teachers, and curious kids of all ages! This beautifully illustrated picture book includes: profiles of inspiring activists; simple explanations of concepts like race, racism, white privilege, implicit bias, and antiracism; an overview of racial discrimination and activism in the United States, past and present; and a checklist of actions kids (and grownups) can take to change the world!
Register: www.rcwms.org/events

December 10, 2023, Sunday, 1:00–5:00 pm
HOLIDAY SALE
1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC
Handmade cards, books, jewelry, animals, etc. by: Kimberley Pierce Cartwright, B. J. Fusaro, Galia Goodman, Bryant Holsenbeck, Jereann King Johnson, Jeanette Stokes, & TheTravelPenguin
Come by to visit, to look at our art, and to buy great gifts. Bring friends and family. A portion of the proceeds from sales will benefit RCWMS. Masks Required
For more information, email: info@rcwms.org.

December 12, 2023, Tuesday, 11:30 am–1:30 pm
ART OF CONSCIOUS AGING: A Group for Women (via Zoom)
Contact: RCWMS, info@rcwms.org.

*December 20, 2023, 7–8:30 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 practical tools for everyday self-care to Black women-identified

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Illustration by Julia Ilana

people in all forms of ministry.
December theme: *Just for Today: Honoring All of Me in the Here and Now*
Leader: Kimberly (Gaubault) McCrae
Cost: \$10–\$40. Register: www.rcwms.org/events

December 21, 2023, 7:00 pm
TARA PRACTICE (Free & via Zoom)
Drawing from *Tara: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*, Rachael Wooten offers teachings and guided meditation. (3rd Thursdays)
Leader: Rachael Wooten, PhD, Jungian analyst, writer, and Tibetan Buddhist dharma teacher.
More: www.rachaelwootenauthor.com/practices

January 17–19, 2024, Wednesday–Friday
INDIGO FLOW: RECLAIMING THE SACRED IN YOUR LIFE with Heidi Gessner
Well of Mercy, Hamptonville, NC
This restorative retreat is inspired by Heidi's new book, *Pockets of Grace: Lessons from Darkness, Lessons from Light*. In this time of intense collective transformation, with its confusion, insecurity and despair, it's important to recognize the voice of your own soul and feel included in a field of kindred spirits. We'll listen to what is stirring inside of us and set a transformative tone for the year ahead.
Leader: Heidi Gessner, MDiv, BCC, is an ordained United Church of Christ minister, a former UNC Hospitals Palliative Care and Bereavement Chaplain. She provides spiritual counseling and grief coaching.
Cost: \$490
Register: www.heidigessner.com/reclaim/

January 20, 2024, 9:30 am–4:30 pm
BE YOUR OWN GURU–An Introduction to SoulCollage®
St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cary, NC
Come learn SoulCollage®–the gentle, playful way of exploring one’s life by giving voice to the soul through collaged images. No artistic ability required!
Leader: Becky Hambrick, M.Ed. offers spiritual direction, dream groups, Enneagram coaching, and SoulCollage® workshops/retreats
Cost: \$125 (with lunch, snacks, & workshop materials)
Contact: beckyhambricksd@gmail.com, 919-219-5676

February 2–4, 2024, Friday, 4:00 pm–Sunday, 11:00 am
PERFECTLY IMPERFECT! A retreat for women that focuses on the beauty of imperfection.
Well of Mercy Retreat Center, Hamptonville, NC
The oops, the unintended, the accidental, and the crooked—all have a place at this retreat. Surprise yourself when your ego takes the back seat and your worries about creating “good art” are set free. This retreat will engage your spirit with a mix of art materials, hands-on projects, writing prompts, new connections, and time for rest. All to find the beauty in the imperfections of what we create.
Leader: Claudia Fulshaw lives in Durham, NC. She is an artist, long-time wanderer, and leader of retreats that combine Art, Spirit, Nature & Rest.
No art experience needed. Meals & materials included.
Cost: \$490 - \$550
Contact: www.artwanders.com

*WEEKS OF QUIET & WRITING
January 2–9, 2024 (Tues.–Tues.) led by Jeanette Stokes;
May 6–12, 2024 (Mon.–Sun.) led by Carol Henderson;
May 12–19, 2024 (Sun.–Sun.) led by Jeanette Stokes;
Sept. 22–29, 2024 (Sun.–Sun.) led by Jeanette Stokes
Info: contact Jeanette at info@rcwms.org

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Reunion

by Jeanette Stokes

I may never know why I decided to drive fifteen hours from North Carolina to western Massachusetts for my 50th college reunion, but that’s what I did. Perhaps it was because my stepfather insisted we drive from Oklahoma to Massachusetts when I enrolled in Smith College in the fall of 1969. He wanted me to understand how far away I was going and to see a stretch of America along the way.

On a Wednesday in May this year, I loaded my car and headed north, through the North Carolina countryside and into Virginia. People in a hurry might have driven up I-85 and I-95 to Richmond, Washington, DC, New Jersey, and New York, but that was exactly what I wanted to avoid. I took state highways and back roads through Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York passing through the Blue Ridge, the Poconos, the Catskills and eventually the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts. It still felt like spring in the north and all those mountains were bright green. I listened to James Taylor and the Indigo Girls and Holly Near as I followed backroads through forests toward the world of my college years.

I stopped the first night in Charlottesville, Virginia, where I enjoyed a walk on a dirt road, a brief swim in a chilly pool, and a warm dinner. On Thursday I drove for many miles on Pennsylvania Highway 209 toward Deep Water Gap. I had picked out a bed and breakfast there, because the route sounded lovely and the town’s name was inviting. It turns out Hwy 209 was not as scenic as I imagined, except for a beautiful section through the Deep Water Gap National Recreation Area. The town itself is a tiny stopover on the Appalachian Trail, named for a gap in the mountains with a river running through. The best part of that day’s drive was the wild flowers, delightful patches of fluffy purple and white phlox beside the road.

The next morning, after a fancy breakfast with way too much sugar, I continued following 209 to the New York Thruway, toward Hudson, New York, where I crossed the river. I passed through Chatham, New York, and took Route 9 to Northampton, my destination.

After I located a place to park on the Smith campus, I checked in and found my way to my assigned dorm room. I enjoyed dorm life while in college and was happy to relive the experience. I had a room in “the Smith quad” that reminded me of my sophomore single. Enormous double-hung windows looked out on hardwood trees in the quad. I opened the window wide and hoped birds would not take it as an invitation. The next morning I enjoyed breakfast in a large dining hall with over one hundred women and was even tempted to wear my nightgown like we had as students.

The planned reunion activities and catered meals were fine, but I had come for two main reasons: to enjoy the campus itself and to connect with friends. The first was easy. Ahead of time I had said that if the weather forecast was bad I would stay home. I had suffered through enough cool damp weather there when I was a student. But we were lucky this time. Though North Carolina had a cool rainy weekend, it was eighty degrees, sunny, and gorgeous in Northampton.

The Smith campus is an arboretum and beautiful most any time of year. For lunch on Saturday, I perched on a plastic chair in the midst of the botanical garden next to Victorian greenhouses and gazed at Paradise Pond. That

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evening after dark, my friend Lisa and I strolled through the main campus lit by Japanese lanterns lining the walkways. It brought back a sweet memory of walking through similar lanterns with my mother and step-father on my own graduation weekend.

Spending time with Lisa was a highlight of the weekend. I found her as interesting, lively, and progressive as ever; when we were students she had taught me how to study and how to navigate New York City. She, another classmate Ronnie, and I shared delicious political discussions during the weekend and satisfying strolls through the campus.

Another treat was gathering in the living room of Cushing House, my dorm. Smith assigns students to dorms somewhat randomly, and when things go well, students stay in the same dorm all four years. Seeing my Cushing House friends is one of the reasons I attend reunions. When I met some current Cushing students who were working reunion, we devised a plan. Fourteen of my former dormmates and I had a great time hanging out in the Cushing House living room, telling stories to current students and taking pictures of one another.

It was a full and deeply satisfying weekend. I’ve learned that there’s no substitute for putting my body in a place. I can close my eyes and imagine being on the Smith Campus, but it’s not the same as actually being there. The sights and sounds, the familiar landscape, even the new buildings, delighted me. I walked 14,000 steps each day, visited the art gallery and the new library, redesigned by Maya Lin, heard speeches by Kathleen McCarty, the outgoing Smith President, and visited with two friends who live in town.

It was comforting to be in a place so familiar, even with new buildings crowding what were formerly open greens. A place where I spent four influential and formative years, where I made friends, fell in love, discovered the connection between faith and politics, opposed the war in Vietnam, and became a feminist. It may be true that you can’t return to a place expecting it to be the same, but it was deeply satisfying to be on the campus, to stand on ground that had shaped me, inspired me, and sometimes aggravated me.

Being on the campus allowed me to remember where I have come from and glimpse who I had been all those years before. I remembered feeling fearless and being gleeful about trying new things, like taking classes in subjects I knew nothing about and making midnight trips to Boston. The college has a long history of helping women to see that they are valuable human beings, that educating their minds is worthwhile, and that their job in the world is to make a difference. Over the years, Smith has turned out doctors, lawyers, ministers, politicians, scientists, writers, artists, activists, and more. Yes, the student body in the late 1960s and early ’70s was overwhelmingly white and upper class. Even so, I’m grateful beyond words that I wandered there in 1969. And I’m glad that it has since been intentional about making the resources of the college available to a more diverse student body. I would be a different person today if it had not been for my years at Smith.

The professors I admired are mostly gone, but as I stood on the steps of Tyler Annex, the old wooden building where my beloved math professor Alice Dickinson had her office, I remembered the day she said, “The most insidious thing on this campus is that the women think if they don’t have a date on Saturday night, going to the

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Calendar...

ONGOING

Wednesdays, 12:00–1:00 pm Eastern Time (Weekly)
WORD*PLAY with Allison Kirkland (via Zoom)
Working with prompts enlivens a writing practice—new words, sounds, colors, and new ways of thinking. We'll be writing and sharing, getting inspiration from each other, and being a part of the literary community. All genders and experience levels welcome.
Leader: Allison Kirkland is a writer and educator based in Durham, NC. She earned her MFA at The New School. More: allisonkirkland.com
Cost: \$15 for one session; \$58 for a 5-session package
Register: www.allisonkirkland.com/wordplay

SOLO WANDERINGS & SOCIAL WANDERINGS!
Creative Retreats (with day and overnight options)
The Stable, a retreat, Durham, NC
Sign up for a self-guided one or bring a friend or five and enjoy a self-guided art retreat. Abundant materials, detailed instructions, beverages and snacks included. Ages 12 and up.
Leader: Claudia Fulshaw, artist & retreat leader.
Cost: \$115 solo/\$75 extra person; overnight is extra
Contact: artwanders.com, claudia@artwanders.com

Reunion...

movies with a friend is second best.” I also recalled once chatting with her outside a classroom building and saying I didn’t feel like going to class on such a beautiful day. And my shock when she replied, “If you don’t want to come to class today, you will feel like it another day.”

On the way home, I stopped in Carlisle, PA, half way between Durham and Northampton and enjoyed a stroll around the campus of Dickinson College, which I knew nothing about. I had a great lunch at the Blue Winged Frog in Front Royal, Virginia, and then made the only big mistake of the trip. I decided to take the beautiful but narrow and winding Skyline Drive toward Charlottesville, only to get caught in rain and dense fog. I worried about my safety until a park ranger helped me figure out how to get off the scary mountain road. Afterwards, I spent a second night in Charlottesville where I ate a simple supper and enjoyed familiar night noises. The sounds of chirping birds and creaking cicadas assured me that I was in the South again. When I got home, I was tired but glad that I had made the effort and taken myself on a trip through my past.



Writing...

then gather in the evening to share their writing. It feels like a little bit of heaven. Each weeklong retreat offers me enough time and space to sink into my writing, to wander off on hardly-related research tangents, to run into myself, and to make a little progress on various projects. I wish I were there right now.

I love to sit by the window of Room Seven, look out at the sea, make notes in my journal, sip a cup of tea, and wait for a dolphin to swim by. From this heavenly perch, the world is almost always beautiful. Pelicans pass low across the water, sea gulls squawk, and sometimes a cormorant sits atop the water, spreading its wings to dry.

As I sip my cooling tea, I often feel like the luckiest person in the world. The most amazing part is that being there is part of my job. Writing weeks have been so satisfying to me and to many participants that they have persisted for twenty years. Consider giving yourself a week of quiet and writing. See the Calendar for upcoming dates.



RCWMS is a forty-six-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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