

South of the Garden

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

Volume 45, Number 1

March 2024

Spring

by Jeanette Stokes

The seasons pass so quickly. It feels like only a few days ago that I was taking ornaments off the Christmas tree, carefully wrapping them in tissue paper, and remembered where each one came from. This small painted tugboat from a trip to Ocracoke. A heart made from an old quilt, a gift from a friend in Blacksburg, VA. The silver bell my mother gave me. The felt Santa I made for the fluffy pine Christmas tree in my apartment after graduate school.

Since I took down the tree, Brigid's day on the first of February marked the time of year when we notice the days are getting longer. By mid-February, daffodils, crocus, and bright pink apricot trees were blooming and spring was nearly upon us.

At the Resource Center we are grateful for the warming of the days and the beauty all around us. We are also aware of the violence in the world. Our hearts break for those involved in the wars in Ukraine and in Gaza. We shudder at reports of violence and mean-spirited politicians at home. Still, we are called to bear witness to joy and sorrow and to do what we can to heal the broken places at home and in the world.

Artists and creatives often help us process and hold life's complexities. We are pleased to welcome photographer MJ Sharp as our artist in residence this year. MJ is an artist and educator based in Durham, NC who takes an unusual approach to seeing things. She is fascinated by the dark and takes photographs at night, in the dark. She was a visiting Fulbright Scholar at the University of Exeter, UK for the 2021/2022 academic year working on an art/science collaboration *Our Disappearing Darkness and Recreating True Night*. She has taught at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, served on the Faculty Advisory Committee of the Nasher Museum of Art, and was a founding member of the Duke Faculty Union. Check the calendar for the program MJ's leading in March.

Writing can also help us hold the complexities. This spring you might choose to take a writing workshop with Shawna Ayoub or Laurel Ferejohn, or join a weekly writing group with Allison Kirkland. You could consider attending one of our weeks of writing and quiet at the coast this year. Or to understand yourself better, you might attend one of Chelsea Yarborough's Enneagram workshops.

As we appreciate the warmth and beauty of this season, we want to express our appreciation to you as well. We are so grateful to everyone who participates in our programs, uses our resources, or supports our work. Thank you for your love, your care, and your generosity. Please, be kind to yourself. You are an important part of our community.



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Blanche

by Jeanette Stokes

One evening in early June, my spouse heard a cat in the park next to our house. When we went out to see about it, we thought its non-stop yowling seemed to be a plea for help. We did the wrong thing, though. We gave it milk. Turns out that's only for kittens, because milk can upset the stomach of grown cats. The next day we bought cat food and fed the cat properly. After that, not surprisingly, it took up residence on our porch.

I named the cat before I knew he was male, calling him Blanche DuBois, after the Tennessee Williams character who famously "relied on the kindness of strangers."

I quickly came to enjoy sitting on the porch holding Blanche on my lap and running my fingers through his fur. Stroking him calmed something inside of me and reminded me of a fuzzy white muff my grandmother gave me for Christmas when I was three or four. Almost by accident I fell in love with the cat.

Dwight wasn't a fan and didn't want the cat in the house. I wasn't sure I wanted him inside either; I was worried about white cat hair everywhere and the way cats can scratch up the furniture.

Blanche liked to stretch out in front of our front door, like a door guard. Sometimes he'd just lie there. Sometimes he'd stand by the door, meowing as though he wanted to get in. Which turned out to be true. He snuck inside at any opportunity. I developed a dance to get around him, though sometimes I gave up and just let him come inside with me. Moments later, I'd pick him up and take him out again. One time, though, he must have snuck in without my noticing. When Dwight came home an hour and a half later, the cat was happily stretched out on the living room rug.

Gradually, I learned about taking care of a cat. Cheryl, a kind neighbor, loaned us a cat bed that we put on the front porch. Blanche slept there sometimes, especially on cooler nights. When the weather turned cold in the fall, the same neighbor procured a heated cat house for Blanche. He seemed happy to sleep in there.

When Blanche and I went to the vet, he rode in a carrier loaned by the same animal-loving neighbor. Not long after he took up residence on our porch, we had one expensive trip to the emergency vet. He had stopped eating for a day or two, and as an inexperienced cat companion, I worried. The emergency vet is open 24/7, the staff is kind and efficient, but we could have flown to Paris and had breakfast for what it cost.

Blanche is friendly and beautiful. People who passed by on the sidewalk often noticed him and stopped to say hello. Some stopped to take his photograph. He let children play with him and even carry him around sometimes.

(Continued inside.)

Calendar

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

*March 2, 2024, Saturday, 4:00–5:15 pm
OUR BODIES, OUR STORIES: Community Performance
Eno River UU Fellowship, 4907 Garrett Rd, Durham, NC
A performance created by people who've dealt with cancer or other life-threatening illnesses as patients, caregivers or community supporters, and healthcare workers across fields. Disability accommodations, COVID safety, refreshments, and relaxing outdoor areas. Leaders: Marie Garlock, PhD, with sound healing music by Rev. Stacy Grove.
Cost: Free. Registration requested, walk-ins welcome!
More: www.itisinyou.org/our-bodies-our-stories-series

*March 12, 2024, Tuesday, 11:30 am–1:30 pm
ART OF CONSCIOUS AGING: A Group for Women (via Zoom)
Leaders: Joanne Napoli and Suz Robinson
Topic: *As I'm Breathing My Final Breaths, What Advice Would This Me Give The Now Me?*
Contact: RCWMS, info@rcwms.org.

March 14–16, 2024, Thurs. 3:00 pm–Saturday 1:00 pm
RISE CONFERENCE: The Power of Our Voices & The Telling of Our Stories
Omni Hotel at Centennial Park, Atlanta, GA
Hosted by the RISE Together Mentorship Network, this three-day mentorship and leadership development opportunity is for women of color ministry leaders. Through networking, inspirational worship, dynamic panel discussions, and empowerment sessions, women of color ministers will be Renewed, Inspired, Supported, and Empowered to navigate difficult spaces, overcome barriers, and embrace the fullness of God's call on their lives. Open to all women of color ministry leaders, activists, clergy, and lay leaders.
Cost: \$325 for the full 3-day conference
Register: utsnyc.edu/2024riseconference/

March 15, 2024, Friday (deadline)
WATER ESSAY CONTEST 2024
In the Style of Rosemary Ganley: “Feminists Change the World 650 Words at a Time”
Feminist work in religion and social change is accomplished in many ways, often through writing. Enter WATER's Essay Contest to see how it is done a la Rosemary Ganley, a Peterborough, Ontario feminist activist and writer whose weekly columns in *The Peterborough Examiner* make waves. Up to three writers will receive \$650 each for their successful essays. Contest guidelines, and information on submissions: www.waterwomensalliance.org/water-essay-contest/

*March 20, 2024, 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 practical tools for everyday self-care to Black women-identified people in all forms of ministry. Themes:
March: *Black Love Goals—Loving the Skin We're In*
April: *I Know What I Know: Embracing Our Divine Power(s)*
May: *Under the Influence: Ancestral Knowledge and Discerning Our Truth*
June: *Embodying the Exhale: Breathing as an Act of Resistance*
Leader: Kimberly (Gaubault) McCrae
Cost: \$10–\$40.
Register: www.rcwms.org/events

(Continued next column.)



Willie879/Freepik.com

March 21, 2024, 7:00 pm (3rd Thursday)
TARA PRACTICE (Free & via Zoom)
Teachings and guided meditation, drawing on *Tara: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*.
Leader: Rachael Wooten, PhD, Jungian analyst, writer, and Tibetan Buddhist dharma teacher.
More: www.rachaelwootenauthor.com/practices

*March 24–29, 2024, Sunday–Friday
ECUMENICAL HOLY WEEK LABYRINTH WALK
Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, NC
Sponsors: Several Chapel Hill churches
Walking a labyrinth is an ancient spiritual tool for reflection. The 40'x40' labyrinth laid out on the floor of the sanctuary is a replica of the one found at Chartres Cathedral. Prayer stations and resources provided. Walk the RCWMS Labyrinth, wear clean socks, and allow 30 minutes for your walk. Free and open to the public.
Schedule: binkleychurch.org/calendar/

*March 23, 2024, Saturday, 2:00–4:00 pm (via Zoom)
WRITING GREAT ESSAYS with Shawna Ayoub
Dive into what makes a great essay, troubleshoot writer's block, and enhance essays at the sentence level. Receive information about essay writing and how to heighten your already-written essay. Writers may contact Shawna for written feedback within two weeks of this workshop. Leader: Shawna Ayoub is a brown, queer, Durham-based writer and instructor whose work prioritizes the engagement of difficult topics.
Cost: \$75–100. Scholarships available.
Register: www.rcwms.org/events/

*March 26, 2024, Tuesday, 7:00 pm (via Zoom)
WOMEN IN EARLY PHOTOGRAPHY with MJ Sharp
Join MJ Sharp, current RCWMS Artist in Residence, and Elizabeth Howie, PhD, to explore women in photography from mid-1800s to the 20th Century.
Cost: Free
Registration required: www.rcwms.org/events/

*April 4, 2024, Thursday, 7:00 pm
LOVING OUR OWN BONES: A Reading with Julia Watts Belser (via Zoom)
Author Julia Watts Belser (she/her) is a rabbi, scholar, spiritual teacher, and a longtime activist for disability, LGBTQ, and gender justice. She is a professor of Jewish Studies in the Dept. of Theology and Religious Studies at Georgetown Univ. and in their Disability Studies Program. Her book, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole*, won a National Jewish Book Award. She's an avid wheelchair hiker, gardener, and lover of wild places. Captions & ASL interpretations provided.
Cost: Free. All welcome. Registration is required.
Register: www.rcwms.org/events

*April 18, 2024, Thursday, 5:00–9:00 pm (via Zoom)
FLASH OF SILVER, with Laurel Ferejohn
Flash: it's crystalline and compelling. In this workshop for beginning to seasoned writers of memoir or fiction, you'll learn about the form that stands proud in its brevity and that can boost all your other writing. Enjoy creating to prompts, with readings and discussion. Leader: Laurel Ferejohn is a writer and independent editor with publications of flash fiction, flash memoir, short stories, essays, and poetry.
Cost: \$60, Register: www.rcwms.org/events/

*April 28, 2024, Sunday, 2:00–4:00 pm
WRITING THE BODY with Shawna Ayoub (via Zoom)
We store our emotional experiences in our physical bodies. Anniversaries of loss may bring bodily pain, heaviness, or fatigue. Together, we will practice feeling into our body stories safely in order to capture them in words. We'll learn about how the body stores memory

(Continued next column.)

Calendar...

and take home practices for listening to the stories our bodies want to tell us. Writers may contact Shawna for written feedback within two weeks of this workshop.
Leader: Shawna Ayoub (see March 23 for description.)
Cost: \$75–100. Scholarships available.
Register: www.rcwms.org/events/

*May 9, 2024, Thursday, 6:30–8:30 pm EDT
EXPLORATION of the ENNEAGRAM with Chelsea Yarborough
Trinity Ave. Presbyterian, 927 W. Trinity, Durham, NC
We'll talk about the Enneagram and the environments and practices that help each number move through the processes of growth to their season of blooming. We will move the numbers and engage in activities that allow us to ask, "What might be my next bloom?"
Leader: Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, PhD, is a professor at Phillips Theological Seminary, an ordained minister, a poet, and an Enneagram coach.
Cost: \$25, \$40, or \$60. Sliding scale also available.
Register: rcwms.org/events/

*May 19, 2024, Sunday, 1:30–3:30 pm EDT
PLAYING WITH SHAPE & COLOR with Debra Wuliger
The Trees, 1701 Pleasant Green Road, Durham, NC
Have you longed to paint freely but the white canvas and choosing which paints feels like a mountain too high to climb? In "Playing With Shape and Color" Debra Wuliger will offer prompts, lay out an array of colors, and guide you to create a 9"x12" abstract design. This way you can relax and let your heart and hand move across the canvas. Let's paint!
Leader: Debra Wuliger delights in painting joyous geometric paintings full of vibrant color. She also guides others to listen to their own intuitive voice and create.
Cost: \$40, all supplies will be furnished. Bring a smock.
Register: rcwms.org/events/

*June 23, 2024, Sunday, 2:00–4:00 pm EDT (via Zoom)
THE ENNEAGRAM AS A TOOL FOR LIBERATION with Chelsea Yarborough
Together we will think about the Enneagram beyond the gifts it provides to us as individuals and think about how it can serve us as a collective. If you care about people, community, justice, and hope for a whole and well world, this is for you. We will talk about the gifts/challenges of each number and engage how interconnected relationships support our work of liberation. All levels of Enneagram experience welcome.
Leader: Chelsea Brooke Yarborough (See May 9.)
Cost: Cost: \$25, \$40, or \$60. Sliding scale also available.
Register: www.rcwms.org/events/

*September 22–29, 2024, Sunday–Sunday
WEEK OF QUIET AND WRITING for Women
Pelican House, Trinity Center, near Emerald Isle, NC
Wouldn't you like a week of quiet days to think and write? Come spend a week of quiet and writing with a supportive group of women at the beautiful Trinity Center. We are silent in the daytime so participants can read, write, or rest. We gather in the evenings to reflect on the day and share our work. Room and meals are included. You get your own room, space, and time.
Leader: Jeanette Stokes, Contact: jeanette@rcwms.org
Cost: \$975. Contact: jeanette@rcwms.org

*WEEKS OF QUIET & WRITING
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
January 2–9, 2025 (Thurs.–Thurs.) led by Jeanette Stokes
Info: contact Jeanette at info@rcwms.org

(Continued on back.)



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Blanche...

When I came home from work in the afternoon, he'd often roll over on his back to greet me. If he was not in view, I'd jingle my keys, and sometimes he'd come running. When he did, that flash of white streaking across the park made my heart sing.

Blanche wasn't much interested in cat toys. He was more of an adventurer than that. Sometimes he'd kill a mouse or a small vole and bring it to the porch. He liked to prowl around underneath the orange dumpster in the front yard of the renovation project across the street and get covered in something that looked like motor oil. Once he climbed up in a neighbor's weeping cherry tree and got stuck, and it took me a while to coax him down.

When I'd leave the house, I'd often say, "Guard the castle." But I was more worried about his safety than I was about the house. So, I'd often add, "Let's not play squished cat, okay!"

In September, a medical student found him wandering on Duke's East Campus, a block or so from our house. I had had him "chipped," so the student was able to take him to a vet and get in touch with me. I was at the coast for a writing week, but the student offered to keep him for a few nights. I hoped she might like him and provide him an indoor home. Though she thought he was sweet, she didn't think her small apartment and travel schedule could accommodate a cat.

That's when I decided I had better get serious about finding Blanche an actual home. I had mixed feelings about that. Dwight had not warmed to the cat, and cat care had its challenges for me: mostly the feeding schedule and the worry. So, I began asking friends and neighbors, "Do you need a cat?" Most everyone said no.

Then at my neighbor Bonny's house for a Sunday afternoon art date in October, I asked the small circle of women, "Does anyone need a cat?" Bonny responded, "Maybe."

Though Bonny and her husband Michael usually had pets, they had lost their last one, an elderly dog, just a few months before. She said they were not sure if they were ready for another pet, but they would talk about it. A few days later, they came to my house to meet Blanche. We sat on the front porch, and they watched Blanche being his usual friendly, playful self. I suggested they might keep him over Halloween, when there would be hundreds of children in the park next to our house. I didn't want Blanche to get tangled up in the commotion.

So, they came back just before Halloween, and we put Blanche in the cat carrier. I handed Bonny and Michael the cat bed, several dozen cans of cat food, a few toys, and off they went back to their house, half a mile away.

A few days later, the visit seemed to be going well. Bonny sent a picture of Michael with the cat wrapped around his shoulders and a report that Blanche seemed comfortable in the house. At the end of the first week, she said they'd keep him for another week and start letting him out for short periods of time. After that, it was settled. He was their cat. He now lives with them happily, sleeps on their bed, and goes

(Continued on back.)

Blanche...

in and out as he pleases. They call him Mr. B.

When the cat was gone, I felt a little sad. I missed him, but I did not miss worrying about tripping over him or finding him run over in the street.

Throughout my time with Blanche, I suspected that my ambivalent feelings were connected to the pets I lost in my parents’ divorce. Did this explain how I could have let this little furry creature into my heart and also been willing to give him up?

My father left my mother (and me) when I was twelve. A year later, Mother and I moved out of our house and into a nearby apartment complex that didn’t allow pets. Mother had always taken good care of the cats, dogs, fish, and birds that my father brought home, but later I came to understand that she was not really a fan of pets. In moving to the apartment, we gave up two small poodles, Gigi and her daughter Monnie. They were my dogs. I got Gigi when I was eight in a trade. I gave up constantly sucking the two middle fingers on my left hand and Mother and Daddy got me a poodle. My grandfather had tried previously to make a similar deal with me that failed. He offered a cow. I didn’t want a cow, but I did want a poodle.

I loved the poodles without reserve. I think Mother mostly looked after them, but I played with them and hung out with them. They were great company for this only child.

When my father left and then the poodles went away, perhaps I told myself I would not get attached to a pet like that again. It was too dangerous. Not consciously, but somewhere inside. I’m not sure, but the evidence suggests it’s possible. Except for my halfway (and worry-filled) relationship with Blanche, I have not had a pet since.

But still, it seems like this little white ball of fur wormed his way into part of my heart that I had long held in reserve. Even then, though, I couldn’t stand the thought that I might live with him, care for him, love him, and someday watch him die. I worried about him all the time and not just because he liked to cross the street in front of our house. I’m not sure I was up to the task of having my heart broken that way. I don’t know how people do it. Seriously. I don’t.



micloggi76/Freepik.com

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. We will be writing and sharing, inspiring one another, and being a part of the literary community. All genders and experience levels welcome.
Leader: Allison Kirkland, MFA, is a Durham-based writer and educator. 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



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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