

South of the Garden

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

Volume 46, Number 1

March 2025

Spring

by Jeanette Stokes

Spring is bursting out everywhere in Durham. We have had some warm sunny days and lots of flowers are opening. It's a good thing, because the first months of 2025 have felt quite challenging, especially once the new administration took office in Washington, DC. The ongoing aftermath of the hurricane that struck Appalachia, the fires in Los Angeles, mean-spirited executive orders from the White House, and the suggestion that straight white men should be in charge of everything all made it hard. That on top of the ongoing suffering of children without enough food or health care, immigrants who fear being deported, and LGBTQ people who may now feel unwelcome in their own country.

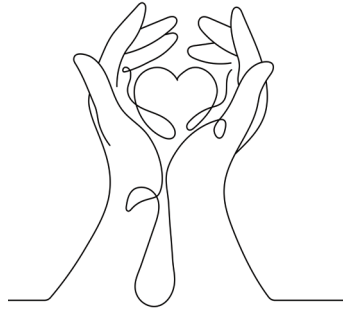
Many of the wise people I read and listen to say are all the same things: strengthen your communities and reach for art, music, and joy.

At RCWMS we continue to create opportunities to gather, support one another, reflect, celebrate, and plan for the future. To help the staff and interns work together more effectively, we held a weekend staff retreat at Emerald Isle in February. Getting away from the NC Triangle after the snow was a bit tricky and once we gathered at the coast it was cold, but a few days together, lots of sunshine, brisk air, and a bright blue sea helped to revive us all.

We are excited to be helping with a retreat being held in March in honor of the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the Duke Divinity School Women's Center. I served as the second coordinator of the center and look forward to seeing others who were involved in expanding the curriculum and supporting students who identified as female.

We are excited about our plans for *Kindred Spirits: A Convergence of African American Quilters 2025*. After the first Kindred Spirits in 2023, people expressed great enthusiasm for doing it again, and we listened. The 2025 event will take place June 19-21 at the Durham Convention Center. To support the event, search the web for: *Indiegogo Kindred Spirits: African American Quilters* or go to www.rcwms.org and click DONATE. Registration details are now available on our website.

We continue working on our *Jereann King Johnson Documentary Project* and have added an audio interview project. I'm interviewing Jereann on Tuesdays and love listening to longer versions of stories from her life. An educator, community organizer, and quilter in Warrenton, NC, Jereann works for justice and equity every day. We are documenting her life and making a film about her because we believe her beautiful creations and her dedication to community uplift are an inspiration for others. You will have opportunities to see her work at a summer exhibition at Cassilhaus (between Durham and Chapel Hill) and at Kindred Spirits in July.



Centering

by Racquel Gill

Words have been difficult for me lately. My life is words and yet for a few weeks now words have been a deep struggle for me as our nation wades through political forces who show no regard for our immigrant siblings, our trans beloveds, and the thousands of federal workers who serve this country day in and day out. I have concluded that in this season I cannot lean on my own understanding, but I must tap into the wisdom of Black elders and ancestors who have endured and survived perilous times.

Since the beginning of the year, I have been reading *Crisis Contemplation: Healing the Wounded Village* by Dr. Barbara Holmes. Dr. Holmes, who transitioned from this life to the eternal realm in October of last year, published this book in January of 2021. Our nation was almost one year into the throes of the Covid-19 pandemic and through the hard work of health care professionals, vaccines had just become available to the public with some hesitancy and resistance from particular communities. Our lives had been transformed in ways that we did not yet have language to articulate. How we worked, how our children learned, how we lived, and all that we had lost during the pandemic was not yet digestible because we were faced with the constant task of survival. In the context of a pandemic, uprisings due to racial injustice, and oppression of migrant siblings at our nation's border, Dr. Holmes, in her Black womanist mystical wisdom, beckons those in America to a posture of contemplation in a time of communal crisis. Dr. Holmes borrowed from the words of many Black and indigenous scholars, clinicians, and practitioners to name that the crisis we were experiencing is communal, historical, and intergenerational therefore our journey towards healing must be a collective one.

As I have witnessed the intentional disorientation of these past few weeks, caused by the new leadership in Washington, the quote that keeps returning to me from Dr. Holmes is, "when there is a crisis, it takes a village to survive." There is much that those of the dominant culture can learn from indigenous communities, particularly how to lean into communal bonds and collective wisdom. Our American commitment to individualism makes this leaning difficult. We would rather rely on our own resources, degrees, pedigrees, and our circles of insularity. We would rather lean on our book talks, our podcasts on NPR, and our mobilizing for those on the margins rather than mobilizing *with* those on the margins. Yet Dr. Holmes' work has shown me that when we see ourselves as a part of a larger ecosystem, we can find assurance in the fact that all we need for this hour may not come from us but, through the power of community, all that we need will come to us. It will come to us in the sagacity of elders who have gone before us. It will come to us in the attentiveness of our children who are watching us. It will come to us in the

Calendar

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

March 6–9, 2025

60th ANNIVERSARY: Crossing of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, AL

More: www.selmajubilee.com/

March 7-10, 2025, from dusk until 10:00 pm

GLOW/Outdoor Light & Technology Art Festival with Neolithic Projections by MJ Sharp

Old Library Site, Cary, NC

March 13, 2025, Thursday, 8:30 am–2:30 pm

ANGER: Yours, Theirs, and God's—Quandaries & Conversations for Clergy

Peace Hill @ Avila, 711 Mason Rd., Durham, NC

This timely conversation is for area pastors serving in an array of ministries. A healthy lunch, drinks, and snacks will be provided. This will be the first of three gatherings in 2025 with the intent of providing space and time for clergy conversation and camaraderie.

Leader: Rev. Dr. Paul Lang, Pastor, Cary Presby. Church
Cost: \$35

Register: peacehillavila.org/events/

March 17–18, 2025, Monday-Tuesday

CAMMACK PREACHING Lectures

Butler Chapel, Campbell Div. School, Buies Creek, NC

This year's annual James C. Cammack Institute of Preaching Lectures will be given by Rev. Dr. Zina Jacque.

Cost: Free

Lecturer: Rev. Dr. Zina Jacque

Info: divinity.campbell.edu/church-relations/annual-lecture-series/

*March 16–18, 2024, Sunday–Tuesday

RETREAT in honor of Duke Divinity Women's Center 50th Anniversary

Peace Hill @ Avila, Durham, NC (peacehillavila.org)

You are invited to a time of celebration, honoring the 50th anniversary of founding the Women's Center at Duke Divinity and the herstories embedded in that ministry. Several Duke Div. alums are preparing a time and a space for stories of our lives to be told and heard, for alums and students to meet, and for renewing ties with classmates and with the institution we share.

Cost: \$195 per person includes room, board, & program

Register: peacehillavila.org/event/telling-our-stories-blessings-and-trials/

*March 21, 2025, 12:30-2:00

BLUESTEM Conservation Burial Ground Tour

Come learn about Bluestem, in northern Orange County, that is a land conservancy and a conservation burial ground. A nature preserve and a place of reverence, Bluestem includes a trail network, quiet areas for reflection, open space for contemplation, and areas within its restored landscape for natural burial.

Leaders: Bluestem folk

Cost: \$10, proceeds will support Bluestem

Register: rcwms.org/events

*March 23, 2025, 2-4:00 pm EDT (via Zoom)

SURVIVING YOUR STORY: Expressing Writing for Release & Recovery

Difficult experiences can become lodged in our bodies in ways that impact us daily, and writing is a way to name, release, and recover from those experiences. Expressive writing allows us to make sense and meaning, to re-craft the struggle and better reflect our truth. In other words, it supports you in surviving your story. Course includes a two-hour Zoom session

(Continued next column.)



Illustration by Betsy Barton

followed by exercises and a take-home writing assignment. You may also submit your writing to the instructor for private, written feedback.

Leader: Shawna Ayoub is a brown, queer, Durham-based writer and instructor whose work prioritizes the engagement of difficult topics.

Cost: \$75, \$100. (You may choose all 5 Ayoub workshops this year for \$325 or any 3 for \$200.)

Register: rcwms.org/events

March 27, 2025, Thursday, 11:45 am-3:00 pm

JILL RAITT LECTURE & CHAPEL SERVICE

Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC

Continue the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Duke Divinity School Women's Center with this worship service (11:45 am) and lecture (2:00 pm).

Speaker: Kaitlin Curtice, author of *Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God*.

Cost: Free & open to the public

*April 25, 2025, Friday, 1:00- 3:00 pm

STAGVILLE HISTORIC SITE TOUR

Join us for a tour of Historic Stagville, a state historic site in northern Durham County that includes remnants of one of the largest plantations in NC. The Bennehan-Cameron family owned approximately 30,000 acres of land and enslaved about 900 people on this property. Stagville is dedicated to teaching about the lives and work of enslaved people on the plantation.

Cost: \$10

Register: rcwms.org/events

*April 29, 2025, Wednesday, 6:30–8:00 pm

QUARTERLY HEALTH & WELLBEING SERIES with Solita Denard, 2nd session in the 2025 series (via Zoom)

What do you need to take the next step to improve your personal health? This series with an integrative approach is designed for individuals who will benefit from learning in community and will commit to practice moving toward their own vision for improved health and wellbeing. To make a positive change in one or more areas of personal health in 2025, join us. Series includes group sessions and private coaching sessions (a total of 8 sessions) per participant. Upcoming dates: April 29, July 29, and October 29

Leader: Solita Denard, Health Integration 629, LLC, partners with clients as they create a vision and then take action to improve personal health.

Cost: \$229, includes a total of 8 coaching sessions

Register: rcwms.org/events, contact: info@rcwms.org

May 14–18, 2025, Wednesday–Sunday

UU WOMENSPIRIT Spring Gathering

Mountain Retreat & Learning Center, Highlands, NC

The Beginning is the End, the End is the Beginning

Register: www.uuwomenspirit.org

*May 25, 2025, 2-4:00 pm EDT (via Zoom)

REMAKING A MEMORY

Traumatic memories are formed differently than normal memories and can be more intense and longer lasting. When we write our traumatic memories, we have a powerful opportunity to reframe them. Reframing our difficult memories allows us to remake them in a way that serves us. We'll learn together how memories can be intentionally reframed through multiple techniques including altered point of view and writing the story as it might have happened differently. Writers may contact the leader for written feedback within two weeks after workshop.

Leader: Shawna Ayoub is a brown, queer, Durham-based writer and instructor whose work prioritizes the engagement of difficult topics.

Cost: \$75, \$100. (You may choose all 5 Ayoub workshops this year for \$325 or any 3 for \$200.)

Register: rcwms.org/events

(Continued next column.)

Calendar...

*June 19–21, 2025

KINDRED SPIRITS: A Convergence of African American Quilters

Durham Convention Center, Durham, NC

Theme: *Space and Time—Quilting Afrofuturism*

African American quilters will gather for a time of sisterhood, exploration, and fun during Juneteenth weekend for workshops with top quilting professionals and a pop-up quilt show on Friday evening, June 20. Cost: \$150–200, includes conference and 2 lunches
Info: rcwms.org/kindred-spirits-quilting-conference/

*July 27, 2025, 2-4:00 pm EDT via Zoom

WRITING THE BODY

It's a well-researched fact that we store our emotional experiences in our physical bodies. On anniversaries of loss, for example, it is common to feel body pain, heaviness, or fatigue. In this workshop, we will practice feeling into our body stories safely in order to capture them in words. As a group, we will learn about how the body stores memory, and why, and take home practices for listening to the stories our bodies want to tell us. This course is appropriate for writers at every level and of every genre. Writers will take home a packet of writing examples as well as prompts, and can 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. (You may choose all 5 Ayoub workshops this year for \$325 or any 3 for \$200.)

Register: rcwms.org/events

*September 21, 2025, 2-4:00 pm (via Zoom)

BECOMING THE SECOND PERSON

Is there a story that's stuck inside you because it feels too raw to be writeable, too vulnerable to be readable? What if you found out there is a way to create safe distance while still telling that hard story? To minimize trauma and (re)gain control of your narrative by no longer being your story's first person?

Writers will practice using narrative distance as a tool to explore their stories in new ways. You will take home a packet of writing examples as well as prompts, and can 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. All 5 workshops this year for \$325 or any 3 for \$200.

*November 16, 2025, 2-4:00 pm (via Zoom)

REMEMBERING THOSE WE MISS

Writing letters can be a way to express our love and celebrate the relationships we've shared. They can help us preserve memories and stories, confront unfinished business, and expose ourselves to things we may be avoiding. This is especially true when we are writing to those who are gone from our lives. Together we will examine our grief through the epistolary form. In a safe and supportive space, we will write letters to those we have lost as an act of self-care. Writers will take home a packet of writing examples as well as prompts, and can 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. All 5 workshops this year for \$325 or any 3 for \$200. Register: rcwms.org/events

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"Ruth and Naomi" by Luba Lukova
www.lukova.net

Centering...

wisdom of our ancestors who dwell beyond us. It will come to us in the nurture of the natural world that heals and cares for us.

This commitment to a journey towards collective healing calls us to relinquish a need to be in control. This text succinctly and simply reminds us that "we don't control very much at all, but we think that we do." As a control freak in recovery, this is tough for me. I am the type of person who requests all flight information every time my partner travels. I track the flight from the moment she gets on the plane until the moment she lands at her destination. Control is an illusion even if it is a seductive one. In the past few weeks, I have received quite a few reach outs via phone calls, text messages, and emails from well-meaning and well-intentioned colleagues and neighbors who are scrambling to get back in control in a world that we are watching become more and more out of control. While these conversations have been informative and meaningful, I cannot help but notice how easy it is for my Black body, my ears, and my inbox to become a repository for the angst of white liberalism.

As we ponder what affected communities might need in the wake of executive orders, many have named a restlessness and anxiousness that is coupled with a deep longing to do something. The truth is that sometimes our desire to do good in the world can be rooted in our obsession to control it. It is sobering to come to grips with the fact that in our work for justice, there will be some outcomes that are simply beyond our control. We could not control innocent lives lost in the plane crash in the Potomac River, no matter how much ill-informed press conferences would want to blame DEI. We ultimately could not control the lives lost in hurricane Helene's devastation, even as climate change needs our desperate attention. I bring this up not to stagnate us into inaction but to remind us of our interdependence.

My Black Church Studies professor Rev. Dr. Eboni Marshall Thurman, now a professor at Yale Divinity School, used to say that for humanity "the kin-dom of God is always at hand, but it is not *in* hand." It's on the way so we must always work toward it. Yet we have not realized it fully and few things remind us of this more than when work towards racial progress is constantly met with white supremacist backlash. In moments like these my vision for the beloved community cannot be limited to the capacity of my feeble hands. My trust cannot only be in what I can do, what I can give, and what change I can enact as an individual, but I trust in something beyond my own strength that gives me strength, the power of the collective. I choose to believe that I am partnering with the universe to bend its moral arc towards justice, and when I center down into contemplation, I am reminded that I have co-laborers in this effort. As the pressure ramps up, may we also remember to center down.

The Rev. Racquel Gill is RCWMS Theologian in Residence and Minister for Intercultural Engagement at Duke University Chapel. A native South Carolinian, she holds a BA in English Education from Columbia College and a Master of Divinity from Duke University. An ordained Baptist minister, Racquel has served congregations and higher education institutions in NC, SC, and New York.

(Continued on back page.)

Next?

What does it mean to walk in the dark?

My current writing project, the one that in my mind floats in and out of being a real thing, may be about walking in the dark, about discovering what is dark and what is light, or maybe how most things that matter carry both inside them. Yesterday, a friend who's almost eighty said that sometimes she wishes she could go back to her twenties and live them knowing what she knows now. I said not me, because it feels like all the things I've gone through have shaped whatever wisdom I now possess. Given that, where is dark and where is light? In some ways we are always in the dark, because we cannot know the future, except the reality that at some point for us as individuals it will no longer exist.

When I had a job with a desk I perched a hand-painted sign on my desk, a quote from Albert Einstein that reads, "How do I work, I grope." This resonates. Waiting for signals to tell me I am on the right path. That process of groping, of groping and waiting, often feels like walking in the dark. Especially when I am not ready for the messages and they don't come, I do feel like I'm walking in the dark, but maybe it's just the glare of the world we live in that wants to steal us away.

The Next Thing

Just do the next thing.
That's all you need to know.
Follow the threads,
answer the question
"what do I want?"
Open the door and
don't worry about what comes next.
There are poems scattered along rooftops
if you know where to look.

I don't know who writes these lines.
A delicate dance just out of reach.
And the minute I notice, the music stops.

This is what chose me.
This liminal space
between language and love.

Marcy Litle, PhD, is a retired historian who taught at Duke University for 25 years. She is a former RCWMS Trustee and longtime volunteer. These two short pieces are excerpts from a book she is working on, tentatively called How to Stop Hiding.



Illustration by Betsy Barton

Calendar..

*May 4-10 & 10-16, Sept. 19-26, 2025, Jan. 2-9, 2026

WEEKS OF QUIET & WRITING for Women

Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC

Spend a week of quiet and writing with a supportive group of women at the beautiful Trinity Center. We are mostly silent during the day so you can read, write, or rest, and we share our writing in the evenings.

Info: contact Jeanette at info@rcwms.org

Leader: Jeanette Stokes

Cost: about \$980. Single room & meals included.

Contact: jeanette@rcwms.org

Ongoing

SOLO WANDERINGS & SOCIAL WANDERINGS!
Creative Retreats (with day and overnight options)

The Stable, a retreat, Durham, NC

Come alone or bring friends and enjoy a self-guided art retreat. 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-seven-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 Fnd., Emerald Isle Realty, Inavale Fnd., the Paul Green Fnd., and the Triangle Community Fnd.

TRUSTEES: Liddy Grantland, Cris Rivera, Marion Thullbery, Angie Wright, and Chelsea Yarborough

STAFF: Jeanette Stokes, Executive Director; Chloe Griffin, Assistant Director for Programming; Bacarri Byrd, Communications & Development; Beth Weiss, Data Manager; MJ Sharp, Artist in Residence; Racquel Gill, Theologian in Residence; Anita McLeod interns: Anna Holems Blair, Latifat Odetunde and Claire Hambrick; Gi Chun, film intern; Oliver Henderson, high school intern.



SUBSCRIPTIONS to South of the Garden cost \$20 and run for 12 months from the time placed. Foreign or First Class is \$25. A subscription is free to anyone for whom the subscription fee is a burden. Tax-deductible contributions over and above the subscription fee are appreciated. Please send a check to our office at: RCWMS, 1202 Watts Street, Durham, NC 27701, or go to www.rcwms.org.

YOUR MAILING LABEL shows the year and month your subscription will expire. 2509 = 2025 September.

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