

South of the Garden

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

Volume 47, Number 1

March 2026

Spring

by Jeanette Stokes

As you may know, I think Spring starts on February 1, Saint Brigid's Day. I have a habit of leaving a piece of blue fabric outside on the night of January 31 so that Brigid can fly over and bless it. This year on January 31 I remembered to do this at about 10:30 at night, opened my front door to a snow-covered porch, and let in a blast of what is for North Carolina excessively cold air. Ten days earlier, I had seen five yellow daffodils blooming in my neighborhood, but then we had not one, but two, winter storms. The first one, on January 24, was something of a disappointment. It blanketed Durham with an inch of sleet that melted each day and froze again each evening, canceling schools and events for a couple of days. The second came on Saturday, January 31, the night I needed to leave my cloth out for Brigid, bringing five inches of fluffy snow and overnight temperatures in the teens. Though the cold was daunting, it was fun to get all bundled up, walk around in the snow, hiking poles in hand, and take pictures. I can't remember the last time I walked in snow in Durham.

Snow is a novelty here. One child in the neighborhood made a small snow person, about two feet tall, and got their parent to carry the sculpture home on a red plastic sliding board. It was a first: watching a snow person parading down the street. Entertaining though the snow can be, it can also be a nuisance to parents. As one friend who runs her own business said, "I don't know what parents with regular jobs do." Monday, February 2, was the fourth Monday in a row that her son had been out of preschool owing to a sick day, a holiday, and two snow days. He had actually only attended school one Monday since December 18. "I miss working on Monday!" she moaned.

While snow may be entertaining in Durham, in Minneapolis, snow and cold added to the intensity and suffering. I am in awe of the brave souls who have been out in the cold trying to protect their neighbors, standing on street corners to watch for ICE, joining thousands in public protests, and documenting the nefarious activities of the agents who have been behaving like a private army. Many of the actions of ICE and Border Patrol appear to be both immoral and illegal: breaking down the doors of private dwellings, pepper spraying people in the face, dragging people out of cars, and murdering Renée Good and Alex Pretti.

In Minneapolis, we are seeing what I can only call lynchings—extrajudicial executions in the streets. People of color in this country have lived with the threat of unauthorized murder for hundreds of years. Now it has been unleashed on anyone who disagrees with the current federal government.

(Continued on back.)



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Empathy Gym

by Marcy Litle

When you read a novel, you are immersing yourself in what it's like to be inside another person's head. You are simulating a social situation. You are imagining other people and their experiences in a deep and complex way. So maybe...if you read a lot of novels, you will become better at actually understanding other people off the page. Perhaps fiction is a kind of empathy gym, boosting your ability to empathize with other people—which is one of the most rich and precious forms of focus we have.

—Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus*

When I was a kid I used reading as a buffer between me and...what? How alone and unseen I felt? I suppose it opened the possibility of other lives. Plus, it was rewarded in our household. My father approved of reading. I have long understood my childhood attachment to reading as a defense. My brother saw it as my way to avoid chores. He told me that not long ago. I laughed. I told him I thought he was onto something. But, books kept me company in a way that nothing else did. They were a way to cope with fear and loneliness.

Before I had an iPad, I carried a novel everywhere, as a kind of shield. I remember talking about it with a friend, who shared this practice. We considered challenging ourselves to go out sans book from time to time, to experiment with the safety of our own company. Perhaps to experiment with the safety of the world.

I still read a lot, and now that I am retired, I spend a great deal of time with my nose in a book. I have recently noticed an undercurrent, a longstanding fear that this is somehow a shameful practice. That it is a way to avoid life. To escape the world. But what if it is my life, or at least a central part of it? The Hari quote above supports this perspective. Reading allows me to be in reflective conversation with others. Maybe engaging with others through their writing and deepening my own thinking through that engagement is what I am meant to do. In this materialist society it's hard to see the value in that. The words "but what good does that do anyone?" echo in my head. Perhaps, though, it is an invitation to faith, faith in the person I was created to be and the gifts that may come from full acceptance. Maybe it has been staring me in the face the whole time.

Marcy Litle, PhD, is a retired historian who taught at Duke University for 25 years. She is a former RCWMS trustee and longtime volunteer. This piece is an excerpt from a book she is working on, tentatively called How to Stop Hiding.

Calendar

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

March 8–9, 2026, Sunday & Monday
PREACHING & TEACHING: Dr. Donyelle McCray
First Presbyterian Church, Durham, NC
This year's annual McPherson Lectureship will be given by Donyelle McCray, Associate Professor of Homiletics at Yale Divinity School. Sunday, 9:45 am class, then preaching, and 3:00 pm seminar. Monday morning, a clergy / church leader breakfast.

*March 10, 2026, 11:30 am–1:30 pm (2nd & 4th Tuesdays)
ART OF CONSCIOUS AGING: A Group for Women
Newcomers welcome. No fee to attend. No need to register. (Via Zoom.) More info at: info@rcwms.org.

*March 12, 2026, Thursday, 9:30 am–2:30 pm
WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?
Peace Hill at Avila, Durham, NC
This retreat will invite participants into one of the most challenging and transformative teachings shared across many spiritual traditions: the call to love one's enemies while also learning to love oneself. What does love require of us? How can we embody love in the midst of discord and division? Leaders: Rev. Angie Wright, author of *Loving My Enemies & Other Outlandish Pursuits*, and Rev. Dr. Cathy Gilliard
Sponsors: Peace Hill at Avila and RCWMS
Cost: \$35, includes lunch
Register: www.peacehillavila.org

MORE in-person events with Rev. Angie Wright & *Loving My Enemies and Other Outlandish Pursuits*
March 15, 5:00 pm, preaching, Beloved Community Church, Birmingham, AL
March 18, 6:30–8:00 pm, Threshold Ctr., B'ham
April 8, Wednesday, 5:30–7:30 pm, Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC

*March 18, 2026, 7:00–8:30 pm (each 3rd Wednesday)
THE MINISTRY OF BLACK WOMEN'S SELF-CARE with Kim McCrae (via Zoom)
Self-care is a multi-generational, multicultural work of self-love, communal love, and Womanist ethicism. We offer practical tools for Black women doing all forms of ministry, personally, in church & community. Leader: Kimberly McCrae is a lover of humanity and actively lives the self-care life.
Register: www.rcwms.org/events

March 19, 2026, 7:00 pm (and every 3rd Thursday)
TARA PRACTICE: Practicing the Sadhanas of the Twenty-One Taras with Rachael Wooten (via Zoom)
Drawing from her book, *Tara: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*, Wooten will offer teachings about Tara and lead a guided meditation. Free.
Leader: Rachael Wooten, PhD, Jungian analyst, writer, and Tibetan Buddhist dharma teacher.
Join: rachaelwootenauthor.com/practices

March 25, 2026, Wednesday, 5:30–7:30 pm
JEREANN KING JOHNSON
Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC
Wednesday night dinner and a program.
Contact: covey@pullen.org



Illustration by Sue Sneddon

March 26, 2026, Thursday (details forthcoming)
ANNUAL JILL RAITT LECTURE with Rev. Joanne Jennings
Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC
The Women's Center and Office of Black Church Studies will co-host the annual Jill Raitt Lecture. Speaker: Rev. Joanne Jennings, Director of Black Church Studies, Yale Divinity School

March 29–April 3, 2026
ECUMENICAL HOLY WEEK LABYRINTH
Binkley Baptist Ch., 1712 Willow Dr., Chapel Hill, NC
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 labyrinth found on the floor of Chartres Cathedral. Prayer stations on the perimeter provide resources for those who walk. Free and open to the public. Please wear clean socks. More: binkleychurch.org/calendar/
Sponsors: Several Chapel Hill churches
Contact: RCWMS, 919-683-1236, info@rcwms.org

April 18–19, 2026, Saturday–Sunday
FINDING THE JASMINE AGAIN & AGAIN: A Weekend Retreat led by Susan Stein
Peace Hill at Avila, Durham, NC
Focus will be on the writings of Etty Hillesum
Register: www.peacehillavila.org

*May 10–17, 2026
WEEK OF QUIET & WRITING for Women
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
Spent a week of quiet and writing with a supportive group of women at beautiful Trinity Center. Leader: Jeanette Stokes
Cost: about \$1,100. Single room & meals included.
Contact: jeanette@rcwms.org

ONGOING

RCWMS's sister organization, Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), offers several free monthly gatherings via Zoom. All are welcome. No charge, but you must register to receive a link. Info: www.waterwomensalliance.org

SOLO & SOCIAL WANDERINGS: Self-Guided Creative Retreats (ongoing, day or overnight)
The Stable, a private retreat in Durham, NC
Come experience a solo creative retreat, or bring friends. Choose: Poetry & Art Journals, Vision Board Journals, Peace Poles, Labyrinths, Forest Bathing & Earth Art, or R&R&Art. Materials, detailed instructions, beverages, and snacks included. Come experience a self-guided, relaxing, soul-smiling day (even add a night or two!) at The Stable. Claudia will greet you and introduce you to your Wandering. For ages 12+.
Leader: Claudia Fulshaw, graphic designer, artist, and wanderer who leads creative retreats.
Cost: \$130 solo / \$90 additional person, plus room
Contact: claudia@artwanders.com

*WEEKS OF QUIET & WRITING for Women
Trinity Center, near Morehead City, NC
May 3–10, 2026, led by Carol Henderson
May 10–17, 2026, led by Jeanette Stokes

Preaching

by Chelsea Yarborough

This year, I published my first monograph: *Proclamation Beyond the Pulpit: The Expansive Homiletical Practice of Black Women*. (Find ways to purchase the book below.)

My book centers the proclaiming prowess of Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer as the theoretical giants they were—teaching us what it means to world-bend with our words, never divorced from our work. In it I ask: What do we learn when we center Black women’s sacred speech across different platforms and consider their voices as theoretical inquiry for public proclamation? How might preaching necessarily expand when the pulpit is not the only location of the practice?

I wrote this book because voice matters to me, and Black women’s voices—our voices, my voice—have too often been erased from history or flattened into caricatures that fail to explore the depth of our messages, our labor, and the ways those things have transformed communities and the world around us.

I also wrote this book knowing there are far too many people who miss the power and proclamatory nature of their own voice simply because they don’t feel called to pulpits—or because their identities make it difficult to claim that call in the face of gatekeepers who believe that keeping someone out can silence what’s sacred within.

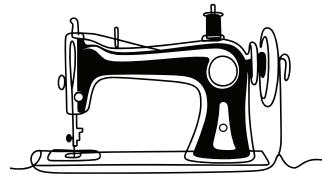
At its core, studying these women invited me into my own voice, my own boldness, and the question: What is calling for my response? What is calling me from the future to participate in the present? Those felt like the wholiest (intentional spelling) call questions I have received.

And maybe—without realizing it—I wrote this book so that my grandmother could taste and see the fruit of her own planting and send a text, emoji included, calling it “Magnificent.” Whew. A gift and feeling I won’t soon forget.

So, I hope you find your way into this book! I would love to know what you think—what’s stirring in you, what you’re wondering about, how your voice intersects and departs, and what’s calling you these days.

Rev. Dr. Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, PhD, is an independent scholar and the Associate Director of Leadership Programming at the Association of Theological Schools. She is a preacher, an ordained minister in the Baptist tradition, a poet, leadership coach, an enneagram teacher, and an RCWMS trustee.

Proclamation Beyond the Pulpit is available from Baylor University Press, from the author, from your local bookstore, and online.



Stitching

by Claire Hambrick

*Late on a hot August day in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in the final weeks of a four-month run of the textile exhibition *Stitching Our Stories*, warm light from Cassilhaus pours out into the surrounding woods. The sun is just starting to set, and waves of art lovers from all over the state file into the home-based gallery. Tonight, the exhibition’s three main artists will captivate a diverse audience with their art and reflect on stories of connection, ancestry, and fabric. Their words dance throughout the exhibit space, floating into the second story gallery where their quilts are hung with exquisite attention to detail. This main gallery presents a feast of colors, textures, and emotion, inviting viewers into connection, reflection, and imagination. It’s a marvel to think that just five months before, this exhibition was a seed of an idea.*



Since the early 2000s, RCWMS has expanded its focus to include arts and creativity, recognizing the pivotal role that the arts play in spirituality and liberation. In my new job as Arts Coordinator & 50th Anniversary Curator, I spend a lot of time diving deep into past projects, like 2006’s *Art and the Feminine Divine* festival and 2008’s documentary film about the late artist Meinrad Craighead. Since I joined this organization in the fall of 2024, I learn about most of these pivotal art projects in retrospect (after all, this organization turned twenty-six when I was born in 2001!). But in the Spring of 2025, one of our most exciting creative projects took place, and I was lucky enough to be part of every step of the process. As a photographer by trade, I took the initiative to document this six-month endeavor, which I share in the new RCWMS Substack called “Notes from the Labyrinth.”

For those who’ve never been part of curating an exhibition, you may be wondering the same question my team and I were pondering in February of 2025: How on earth does one pull off an immersive art exhibition in three months?

As with many RCWMS-sponsored projects, we learn as we go. That’s the ethos RCWMS founder Jeanette Stokes has infused into every project over the decades. We’re a small non-profit with a rotating staff, often made up of current or former seminary students, college students, or, in my case, creatives interested in spirituality and community who happen to wind up in the magical web of RCWMS....

[Read the full post to learn about the steps we took to curate the exhibition and see photographs of the process at www.rcwms.org. Click on BLOG and scroll down to “A Curator’s Reflections on *Stitching Our Stories* Quilt Exhibit.”]

Claire Hambrick is the RCWMS Arts Coordinator & 50th Anniversary Curator. She is a photographer, writer, and media strategist who graduated from UNC Charlotte with a BA in Communication Studies and minors in Film and Women & Gender Studies.

Spring...

In North Carolina, we have been visited by the beautiful witness of the venerable monks' Walk for Peace. Thousands turned out to see them, to bow to them, or to listen to their teachings about meditation and peace. In case you did not follow their journey, here are some details. They made a 120-day, 2,300-mile journey from their monastery in Ft. Worth, Texas, to Washington, DC. They left in October and arrived in DC on February 10. The long and arduous journey took them through heat, rain, snow, ice, and extreme cold. Some of the nineteen monks walked barefoot when the weather allowed, and they relied on the kindness of strangers for meals in the middle of the day and places to sleep at night. They were well accompanied by a support van, a sweet dog named Aloka, and thousands of people who came out to greet them as they passed by. They were encouraged along their way by donations of boots, fruits, flowers, and money.

The monks came up through South Carolina and entered North Carolina on January 15. They crossed the state line at Pineville, NC, where the Rev. Amelia Stinson-Wesley, a longtime RCWMS friend, supporter, and former staff member, is the new mayor. She was able to issue a mayoral proclamation, personally greet the monks, and pin a Pineville lapel pin onto the lead monk's sash.

The monks continued through the North Carolina Piedmont, with stops in small towns. Hundreds of people lined the highways to watch them walking slowly, spreading peace. Hundreds more gathered at the monks' evening stops to listen to one of the monks talk about meditation. Several RCWMS friends said it was such a moving experience to witness the monks' quiet, faithful persistence.

In Raleigh, the monks were greeted by hundreds more who walked with them from Dix Park to the North Carolina Capitol building. There they were greeted by Governor Josh Stein and Raleigh Mayor Janet Cowell, who were bundled up against the cold but were genuinely happy to see them.

May the peace of the monks give us all the internal strength and courage to keep on resisting the immoral and illegal actions of ICE and Border Patrol. Blessings on the people in Minneapolis who have protested even in the extreme cold.



art of line/Shutterstock.com

Jereann

We are making good progress on the Jereann King Johnson documentary project. Dedicated filmmakers, Rafael Samanez and Leilani Clark of Elevate Media Films are shaping the story and filming Jereann, her activities, and people associated with various parts of her life. They are pulling together narrative threads from Jereann's story, including public media, Black land loss, the environmental justice movement, and quilting.

The filmmakers have interviewed Valeria Lee and Jim Lee, the founders of WVSP, the first rural Black-run community radio station in the country, where Jereann worked for a decade when she first came to North Carolina. They are following the construction of a brand new Warren County farmers market pavilion, a project to which Jereann has given considerable time and energy. They have filmed a group project she is leading that will produce quilted portraits of historic Black figures in Warren County. And they have recorded images of Jereann's phenomenal quilts.

We are inspired by Jereann's life and art, and we are thrilled to continue our work on this film.



RCWMS is a 48-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. We mentor and encourage 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 Fdn., Emerald Isle Realty, Inavale Fdn., Paul Green Fdn., Triangle Community Fdn., and Durham Arts Council.

TRUSTEES: Courtney Ariel Bowden, Liddy Grantland, Cris Rivera, MJ Sharp, Angie Wright, and Chelsea Yarborough.

STAFF: Jeanette Stokes, Executive Director; Chloé Griffin, Programming; Bacarri Byrd, Communications & Development; Rachel Sauls, Managing Director; Beth Weiss, Data; Claire Hambrick, Arts & 50th Anniversary Curator; and fellows Margie Peeler and Hilary Pollan.



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.

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ISSN 0890-7676 • www.rcwms.org • info@rcwms.org

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