

South of the Garden

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

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Summer

by Jeanette Stokes

Summer begins in May for me, partly because that is when it finally gets warm enough to enjoy the beach or a swimming pool. And because my birthday comes at the end of May. You could say that I've made up my own version of the seasons, or you could follow the old Celtic calendar in which the middle of summer is actually the summer solstice, in which case summer begins on the first of May.

During a recent Week of Quiet and Writing at Trinity Center on the North Carolina Coast, I went out for an early morning walk and came across a walkable labyrinth someone had drawn in the sand.

What I noticed that day while walking the labyrinth on the beach was that I was forced to look at the world from 360 different angles, from every direction. Walking in circles took me around a center or issue or problem again and again.

I've been walking labyrinths for thirty years (since 1996) and I think I've often focused on the length of the path, or following the path. But this morning, I was aware of going around in circles, and I like that as a metaphor for looking at things from different angles.

Round and round. Like life. It is not a long straight line, though white male western culture would have us believe it is. The one with a hill toward the end and a place on the path where one is "over the hill." Is that forty or sixty-five or... I don't know. But on a path that goes round and round, like a spiral or a labyrinth, where would the hill be? I don't know. It's sort of a ridiculous question.

I had a lovely day. I did many of the same things as other days that week. Making notes in my journal and texting with a friend. Thirty minutes on the phone with a staff person. Walking on the beach, walking to the sound. Sitting in the blue chair on the beach and waiting for dolphins that finally appeared. Two or three of them played together, swimming this way and that, one of them sticking its nose, straight up in the air.

One of the things I love about the rhythm of the days on a writing retreat is that if I get bored or tired, I can go outside and walk to the beach or to the sound and be surrounded by natural beauty and wonder. I am beginning to understand that this causes me to see things from 360 different directions. I love this place, even with its broken stairs and imperfections. To me, it is a little piece of heaven right here on earth.



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Rhythms

by Margie Peeler

This past March, I traveled with another campus minister and six college students on a spring break trip to Cumberland Island, a national seashore just off the southern coast of Georgia. In my work with Presbyterian Campus Ministry at UNC-Chapel Hill, trips like this create opportunities for students (and staff) to step outside familiar routines and pay attention to community, to place, and to the ways the Divine might be encountered in unexpected corners of the world.

Cumberland is a place that feels, almost immediately, like a different world. The island is largely undeveloped. Live oaks stretch wide with limbs draped in Spanish moss, palmettos blanket the forest floor. Wildlife moves freely, including armadillos rustling in the brush, wild horses wandering the shoreline, and birds calling from every direction. It is a landscape that invites you to slow down simply by being in it.

What made our week especially meaningful, though, wasn't just the beauty of the place; it was the rhythms we stepped into while we were there. Each day, we watched the sun rise over the Atlantic and set over the marsh. (Well, almost each day; early wake-ups are hard no matter where you sleep.) Cumberland is narrow enough that you can stand in one place in the morning, facing east to watch the sunrise, and then walk less than a mile west to watch the same sun complete its arc across the sky and set beyond the mainland. There is something grounding about witnessing that full movement of light, day after day. It begins to shape your sense of time... not by deadlines or notifications, but by something older, steadier, and entirely outside of your control.

Over the course of the week, I found myself noticing how different this rhythm felt from the ones that usually organize our lives. During the semester, it's easy for all of us (students and staff alike) to orient ourselves around productivity: assignments, grades, meetings, accomplishments, the constant question of "what's next?" These rhythms are not entirely bad, but they can become all-consuming. They can trick us into believing that our worth is measured by what we produce or achieve. Maybe you have some of these rhythms in your own life?

For that week, Cumberland offered us something different. It invited us into rhythms that feel older than urgency and wider than achievement. The rising and setting of the sun, the tides moving in and out, the quiet persistence of trees and grasses growing where they have for generations.... None of it depended on us, and yet we were held within it.

(Continued on back.)

Calendar

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

Now through July 11, 2026

BIRDS AMONG US: An Exhibition by Bryant Holsenbeck

Craven Allen Gallery, 1106 1/2 Broad St., Durham, NC
Birds Among Us presents a selection of Holsenbeck's mixed media sculptures crafted from recycled materials, an homage to the birds that surround us, our often overlooked companions. In Bryant's own words, "I make birds because I want to know them better. I want to make each bird as clearly as I see them. I transform the detritus of our society—plastic bags, bits of plastic, scraps of fabric—into these animals. I offer this reuse of material as an homage to them. Like birds making their nests, I pick up and discard until the right pieces come together to form each bird."

*June 9, 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.) Email info@rcwms.org for a link to join the meeting.

*June 10, 2026, Wed., 12:00–1:30 pm (via Zoom)
THE HEART OF MINDFULNESS with Jen Johnson
The Heart of Mindfulness is a 90-minute live online workshop that explores heart-centered practices. Research shows that heart-centered mindfulness practices can reduce stress, calm the nervous system, and cultivate positive emotions, including love, joy, gratitude, and awe. Through guided meditation and mindful writing, you'll explore how these practices can become a genuine refuge in your everyday life. This workshop is for anyone who wants to feel more at home in themselves and the world.
Leader: Jen Johnson, MS, MFA, LCMHC, is a mindfulness teacher and counselor. She offers mindfulness coaching and therapy and facilitates workshops on mindfulness, mindful writing, grief, and nature connection.
Cost: Sliding scale, \$25–45. Registration required.

*June 12–14, 2026, 4:00 Friday–noon Sunday
HOPE IS A VERB: Spiritual Grounding for Joyful Changemakers
The Farmhouse at Spring Forest, Hillsborough, NC
Are you feeling overwhelmed by today's challenges? When progress is blocked and the forces of harm seem stronger than ever, it's natural to struggle with frustration and even burnout. But what if hope isn't something that happens to us—but is something we actively practice? This weekend retreat offers changemakers a chance to reconnect with the deeper sources of resilience available to us all. Join us to explore how spiritual practices can help us stay grounded and embody hope in a world that sometimes feels hopeless.
Leaders: Maria Kingery, retreat leader, leads changemakers in building the resilience needed to create lasting impact in an uncertain world. Bonny Moellenbrock, certified spiritual director, helps clients integrate their deepest values into their lives, initiatives, and business strategies.
Cost: \$600 for a single room, \$450 for a shared room.



Illustration by Sue Sneddon

*June 13, 2026, Saturday, 10:00 am–12:00 pm
FREEDOM DREAMING at Historic Stagville with New Legacy Lab
Artist and Cultural Organizer Monèt Marshall invites us to Historic Stagville, a former plantation in Durham County, and to an interactive experience rooted in resistance and liberation. Through performance, guided meditations, and facilitated conversation, we will be invited to expand our imaginations into past and future Black feminist dreaming. Open to all ages, races, genders, and class backgrounds.
Cohosts: New Legacy Lab, RCWMS, and ROSA.
Cost: Sliding scale, \$15–35. Registration required.

*June 17, 2026, 7:00–8:30 pm (every 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

* June 17, 2026, Wednesday, 10:00–12:00 pm EDT
BLUESTEM WALKING TOUR
Hillsborough, NC
Explore this beautiful conservation burial ground.
Cost: \$10, proceeds will support Bluestem.
Register: www.rcwms.org/events

June 18, 2026, 7:00 pm (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

Friday, June 26, 2026, 5:00–7:00 (Quilters' talk at 5:30)
STITCHING THE PEOPLE'S HISTORY
Warren County Memorial Library 119 S. Front Street, Warrenton, NC 27589
Explore the lives of past and present history makers from Warren County through the lens of quilts and quilters. Also on view: Sat., June 27, 10 am–2 pm and Sun., June 28, 2026, 1–5 pm

*July 9, 16, 23, & 30, 2026, 4 Thursdays, 12:00–1:30 pm
MINDFUL WRITING FOR TRANSFORMATION (4-Weeks via Zoom)
Mindful writing is less about craft and more about presence. It's a practice of slowing down, turning inward, and allowing whatever wants to be expressed to move through you and onto the page. In this workshop, we create the conditions for stories to arrive naturally—through mindfulness practices and guided writing activities designed to quiet the mind and open the heart. No writing experience is necessary. This is for anyone who feels called to listen more deeply to their own story.
Leader: Jen Johnson (See June 10 for more on Jen.)
Cost: Sliding scale, \$125–175. (Continued on back.)

Resourcing

by Hilary Bailey Pollan

For 2026, I am honored to be the Resource Engagement Fellow with RCWMS. My fellowship focuses on developing ideas and tools to engage intergenerational donors in courageous and transformational giving to justice-oriented causes.

I began my journey into justice-oriented giving around my thirtieth birthday, as I prepared to inherit a trust left to me by my grandfather. From the start, I'd felt a deep misalignment between my social justice values and this new access to wealth. I knew I needed a community to help me move towards aligning my actions with my values. And, as someone who had worked in and adjacent to nonprofits and philanthropy for many years, I was deeply curious about how my giving could push beyond traditional philanthropic practices and towards justice and transformation.

With these desires and questions, I decided to build a community with other donors who are interested in using their wealth in creative and high-impact ways to support the well-being of our neighbors and community. This intergenerational giving community is called "New Legacy Lab."

What may surprise some people, especially those who run social change organizations, is that one of the main reasons donors don't give is that they feel stuck before even getting started and/or feel discomfort with being a donor. Like many roles we play in society, becoming an engaged and effective donor involves learning particular skills and knowledge to guide our actions. It also helps to be connected to other donors.

My work with New Legacy Lab aims to help donors get started and then stay engaged with their giving. New Legacy Lab provides a home for experimenting, learning, connecting, and co-creating justice-oriented giving practices.

Over the last few years, I've hosted a variety of public events and donor gatherings through New Legacy Lab, including social justice giving plan workshops, intergenerational donor dinners, and giving circles.

Giving Plans are time-bound roadmaps to determine where, how much, and how donors want to give and mobilize their available resources (both financial and non-financial) to co-create the world they envision. Giving Plans provide structure and a process to translate the donor's values into concrete action; they're a super tool for getting donors "unstuck"! I facilitate workshops and offer coaching to help donors create and revise their Giving Plans.

Intergenerational donor dinners are intimate spaces for donors, typically ranging from age twenty-five to seventy-five, to talk openly and courageously about our giving practices.

(Continued next column.)

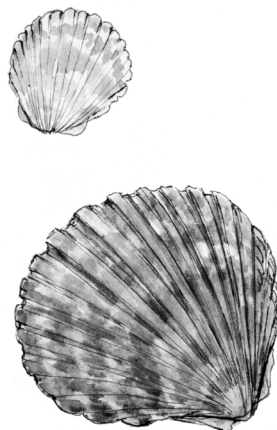


Illustration by Sue Sneddon

During the gatherings, we share stories from our giving, offer resources and ideas, and build new connections. Together, we grapple with awkward questions that feel hard to ask in most other settings because grappling with these questions in community is how donors become more bold, creative, and values-aligned in their giving.

I host an annual **Year-End Giving Circle** where a group of donors gather virtually to boldly and collectively give to grassroots organizations working in the American South. At the 2025 Year-End Giving Circle, with just twenty-nine donors, we moved \$179,450 to six social and environmental justice organizations, with each organization receiving between \$15,000 and \$30,000 in general operating funds. These fast-paced, high-impact collective giving experiences are a joyous and down-right fun celebration of giving—and are always the highlight of my year as a donor.

Additionally, through my Resource Engagement Fellowship, I'm engaging in deep thinking and writing about a new era of values-aligned giving practices. As I meet with other donors and collaborate with change makers, I am documenting the creative and novel ways we can engage donors to use their resources to support their neighbors and community during this particularly trying time. For example, I've been writing about house parties for grassroots fundraising, my thoughts on "anonymous giving," how we can re-imagine prenups to support giving, stewarding relationship between donors and beneficiaries, and frameworks to help donors think expansively about using their resources for transformational impact. I'm also working on a book project about social justice giving plans.

The best way to stay plugged in about my upcoming events, happenings, and writing as the RCWMS Resource Engagement Fellow is to subscribe to my newsletter at www.newlegacylab.com or follow me on Instagram: @newlegacylab.

In a time when too much feels out of my control, organizing donors and sharing my abundance of resources has given me a sense of purpose and confidence in my ability to help neighbors in need. I'm grateful to RCWMS for offering me the time and space to think expansively about how we can bring communities donors together to fully resource this moment.

Hilary Bailey Pollan, (she/hers) MPH, MCRP, is 2026 RCWMS Resource Engagement Fellow. She is an equity-oriented independent facilitator and consultant with Hilary Pollan Facilitation. In 2025, she founded New Legacy Lab. She holds a BA from Mount Holyoke College and dual-degree in City and Regional Planning and Public Health-Health Behavior from UNC-Chapel Hill. She lives in Chapel Hill, NC with her husband, young child, and backyard chickens. Hilary finds joy in cooking, gardening, night swimming, and organizing her neighborhood community.

Rhythms...

One of the gifts of the week was being reminded that we are not separate from creation, nor are we at the center of it. We are participants, creatures among creatures, part of something much larger than ourselves. There was a kind of relief in that realization. If the world does not depend entirely on us, perhaps we are free to live differently within it, free to notice the miraculous cycles unfolding all around us, without or in spite of our presence.

I saw glimpses of this shift in our group. They came during long walks without a clear destination, shared meals cooked slowly over camp stoves, and quiet moments watching the sky change color. These were not "productive" moments in the way productivity is most commonly defined for these college students, but they were deeply formative. They reminded us that being present, attentive, and connected to one another, to the land, and to the Spirit moving through both is its own kind of faithfulness.

As we returned home, the usual rhythms of school and work quickly reappeared, but I carry with me the hope that something from that week remains. I hope we might remember and remind one another (even in small ways) that our lives are held within a larger, more gracious rhythm. A rhythm where our value is not determined by what we accomplish, but by the simple, sacred truth that we belong to a living world full of mystery, beauty, and interdependence.

Originally from Memphis, Margie Peeler attended college at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where she studied Biosystems Engineering and Religious Studies. Knoxville is also where she fell in love with small-scale agriculture and started wondering about how faith might interact practically with caring for land and communities. After college, Margie worked on farms in Pennsylvania and Montana before moving to Durham. She graduated from Duke Divinity School in May 2025 with a Master of Divinity and a concentration in Faith, Food, and Environmental Justice. Margie splits her working time among campus ministry at Presbyterian Campus Ministry at UNC, garden management at Farm Church, and interning for RCWMS. In these roles and beyond, she is interested in exploring connections between theology, creation care, and inclusive community building. Margie is a candidate for ordination in the Mid-South Presbytery of the PC(USA). She very much enjoys pedaling her bicycle and preparing and enjoying yummy food with goofy people.



Illustration by Sue Sneddon

Calendar...

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.



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, Paul Green Fdn., Triangle Community Fdn., and Durham Arts Council.

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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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