

## CHAPTER 1

**“Radical: to the root of the action, to the chore, the core of the soul. I’m melting I’m melting I’m having a meltdown I’m melting I’m melting I’m melting down” – from *The Meltdown Song* – B. Rucker**

### MY LIFE AS A RADICAL SOCIAL WORKER

*White Lady Journal – Notes from a Radical Social Worker* is a collection of my journal notes working in the community as a social worker artist in the 80’s and 90’s. Usually, I was the only white person with a group of black and brown people, mostly teenagers. I had forgotten many of the incidents. In reflection they engender feelings of embarrassment and pain. Then I was oblivious and naïve. Not so much naïve as in a lack of awareness of myself as ‘the white lady’ or the ability to call it racism and talk about it, but naïve in the belief that what I did, the work I did was really important and could break through the systemic racism and change the world. I remember feeling a little like Don Quixote fighting windmills.

Despite it all the kids kept showing up for my programs and the adults in the shelters which were predominately African American attended my groups and performed in the shows we wrote. A need was fulfilled. The need to be counted. The need to express oneself, the need to participate in the system that we were all in. The work created was appreciated. I just did not understand how enormous the work was; how daunting and intense the roots of racism are, and how impossible and dangerous it would be to truly effect change for an avant-garde artist, newly minted MSW social worker in the community.

Although there were other aspects, the work was always creating theatre. These were plays telling the stories of the individuals involved. For the teenagers and children, the theatre was on teen dating, family, and gang violence also racism. For the adults, the plays told the stories of women, seniors in shelters, the affordable housing crisis, and the stories of the mentally ill and fragile homeless of lower Manhattan and how they coped with the aftermath of 9/11, also racism. The kids and the homeless traveled with me throughout the boroughs for presentations at community centers, shelters, street festivals, schools, and churches. We were all passionate about the work.

My naivete never-the-less in reflection was alarming. Perhaps I am still being extremely naïve. Yet I feel The Black Lives Matter movement has opened the conversation for white, as well as black people. I think it is time now for the white lady, as I was so often called to speak.

I am not an academic. I am a worker, an artist, and a social worker. As a child I was very silent, shy. My parents had great financial struggles. I grew up in white upper middle-class community and we were always being thrown out of our rented homes for unpaid rent. Often all utilities were turned off at the same time. I was the artist in the family and the silent second child of five, that was absorbing the conflict and depression of my parents.

Growing up, the only time I heard my parents comment about race was once as a teenager, mother said if we were not white, we would be living in the projects. It was never said as though we were better than black people just that this was a privilege, a lucky thing, that we were white and not forced to move into a poor community, which I got the impression was what ‘the projects’ were.

I remember when in my all-white high school, that one day we had a visiting forensic team from a city school. Most of these students were black. I recall my philosophy teacher asking what we thought about the visiting team. I rarely spoke in class, but this was one of those times and I commented that it felt good on my eyes to see people of another color on the stairs as I was coming to class. My thought was purely aesthetic. It was met with silence. We were asked to write about it. I got a D on that essay. I usually got B’s or A’s on my writings.

The economic crisis and depression in my parent’s life is a relevant story that deeply affected my young adult life. I internalized that depression and since I rarely talked there was no release for my despair.

Theatre however, which I discovered in my senior year of high school, changed my life. Suddenly there was a place for emotion, expression. Through studying others, I learned to be myself.

As a young adult, I came to New York to be an actress. I went on tour, did some regional work, NY showcases, and worked many survival jobs. Eventually, I decided that if unable to pay the rent as an actress, I would at least do work that I believed in. I remember asking myself, that if I were a successful actress, a star, what would I do with all my money? This led me to the decision to teach kids theatre for theatre was my love. It is what had saved me, made me want to live. I was concerned about teen suicide and I decided to teach what I know, what had saved me.

So, I volunteered at my local community center to teach drama to the teenagers. This work led to my returning to school, graduate school and an MSW which led to much of the work that I have written about it in this *White Lady Journal*.

I felt comfortable working with the kids. I identified with the youth and the poverty. The color of our skin didn't matter, to me. The identification was in the struggle for identity. Who am I? What am I? What do I do? What will be my work? The need to act out questions. It was an artistic identification. It was also one of class.

The popular book "*White Fragility*" by Robin DiAngelo states that 'class' is one of the topics 'fragile white people' are to avoid when talking of race.

Too late. Having come from a fragile economic background I related to poor people despite color. Class was generally a misunderstood taboo topic. It was easy for me as I was all too aware of money and the lack of it and how it affects one's self esteem. Artists cross class and that too was my legacy.

Recently I have been reading John McWhorter's book, "*Losing The Race*" written in 2000 which addresses the culture of victimology, separatism and anti-intellectualism that greatly damages black people. Mr. McWhorter is a black man and writes of the time-period, wherein I ran my youth programs. He talks of the low self-esteem created, supported and promoted by specifically the culture of victimology for black people.

Generally, I was not a confident young person. I was a young woman. (I am now 69). When I was growing up little girls weren't encouraged in sports or academic success. As a shy little girl who didn't talk to anyone, I didn't even learn from my peers as I didn't hang out with anyone. My parents did give me love and supported what I wanted to do, but although they encouraged my art, they had their own troubles and the lack of confidence they felt, I absorbed. They also grew up in the period where people didn't talk about their problems, no one went to therapy, so they didn't really encourage their shy daughter to talk.

Now I realize this low self-esteem was for me, a point of identification with the teens and the shelter residents. I was confident only in my belief in the power of theatre and art. John McWhorter states that victimology encourages low self-esteem in black people. The American woman culture in which I was raised also encouraged victimology and low self-esteem.

Recently, I have thought that it is no wonder I didn't become a successful actress. I was a product of my upbringing. I was not taught to compete. (Competition is essential in the success of anyone in show business).

Despite their troubles, my parents never stopped fighting for and loving their children. They were fair and just and believed in America. Those values stayed with me over the years and kept me alive. They also nurtured the need to love and to help, to share what you know.

Today, I think *The White Lady Journal*, may be important to understand some of the problems a white teacher/social worker/artist may encounter in working in black and brown communities. Certainly, for artists and social workers, particularly social group workers, it may be enlightening. I hope some pitfalls may be avoided. I hope it doesn't discourage innocence and joy of the theatre or just helping people. I fear it may, as I reflect on how oblivious I was in seeing and understanding systemic racism, the power politic. I just

kept pushing forward as the white lady with belief in theatre and the process of identification, the content of the work and in completing the work tasked. The great ethic of the theatre, "The Show Must Go On" prevailed. Despite problems that occurred, that was the maxim that I taught and enabled us to complete the work. Do not quit. Do not cancel.

I hope '*White Lady Journal*' encourages the conversation of understanding the great disparity of race in our American culture and at the very least, holds lessons to be learned when fighting windmills.

## **NOTES ON RACISM**

### **February 28, 1996**

Saying we are all racist is counterproductive. When I think and I have, that black people don't like me because I am white and when black people say white people don't like me because I am black, yes, I suppose that is racist thinking on both our parts, but I do not think of myself as a racist and I am sure most black people don't think of themselves as racist.

No one wants to be called a racist or be politically incorrect, but there has got to be way and a place on a community level, for some of this to be voiced; some of the anger, some of the pain. I felt last night I was ignored because I was white. I saw black people go to other people and I overheard conversations about the need for a group in the community to discuss racism among blacks and I went up and said we (Meltdown) were doing forums called *RaceRaps* but no one asked if they could come. I invited them but this same group of blacks/Hispanics did not invite me into their conversation.

I was hurt. I felt it was racist.

On the other hand, I have worked for different community social service agencies and white people have not paid attention to my work, where I had the distinct impression that if I were a black woman, they would have bent over backwards to accommodate my ideas and give credit for my volunteer efforts but this presumption that white women are rich do-gooders and not valid in the discussion prevail.

## **1997**

Racism and sexism are at the root of urban violence on the street and in the home. Meltdown has a longer history of working to promote greater understanding among diverse groups. From the experimental concert that brought together the artists John Cage and Sun Ra to the present violence prevention and leadership programs for youth and women, Meltdown has exemplified programs that confront and combat racist and sexist roots of urban violence.

Meltdown has since 1983 addressed racism and sexism directly in all programs. Many refuse to talk for fear of being labelled racist or sexist. Domestic violence survives on a long history of silence. With the recent Presidential initiative addressing racism and an NYC Mayoral initiative on teen dating violence, now more than ever Meltdown can make a difference as we have developed the skills and the programs to confront racism in public forums. It is important that white and black people discuss these issues together. In so doing, we will be better able to cope with the pain of racism in our daily interactions and truly promote a peaceful co-existence.

## **OVERVIEW**

**The following is a brief overview of Meltdown and its programs that are discussed in further detail in subsequent chapters.**

## **THE BEGINNING**

In 1973, I came to NYC like so many others, to act. My undergraduate degree was in theater. I struggled, got in the actor unions, worked in regional theatre and off-off Broadway, but like so many others, I had many survival jobs to pay the rent. I was not the most confident camper. When I think back, I am amazed that I did as well as I did. I remember at one point in my youth and childhood here in Brooklyn thinking, 'What if I was a famous Broadway star or movie actress then what would I do? What would make me happy?' I thought probably I would work with kids.

I had been a rather depressed young person who often thought about suicide until I discovered theatre and acting, and art. Art was always a high value in my growing up as my mother was an artist and supported all my artistic desires which began with visual art. Working with kids in an attempt to fight teen suicide was the choice that changed my life.

### **MELTDOWN PERFORMING ARTS**

My radical social work developed with a not-for-profit that I co-founded with Rick Russo, my spouse. It was called Meltdown Performing Arts. It was an experimental music theatre company. The experiment began with taking our motley crew of artists into communities to perform and produce community fairs and festivals. This experiment soon evolved into what we called "social service arts".

### **GOOD SHEPHERD SERVICES**

In 1987 we started in our Park Slope neighborhood. I volunteered to run a teen theatre company with Good Shepherd Services, a not-for-profit social service organization providing youth services to the underserved. We used theatre to give voice. Through an acting out process we addressed racism, sexism, teen dating, family and gang violence with theatre. Anything that was on the teen's minds we would act out and present to other young people and to the community. This work led to my return to graduate school and a social work degree.

### **BROOKLYN HOSPITAL – 1993**

While in Graduate School at Hunter College School of Social Work, Meltdown was hired by The Brooklyn Hospital to work with community members who were hired by the hospital to teach their neighbors the importance of preventive health education. I was hired to help organize the presentations using theatre arts. This was 1991, the forefront of the manage care movement which was to fight the use of emergency rooms for health care services for low-income Brooklyn people.

When I completed my social work graduate education I was hired by the hospital as a discharge planner. This was my first real full-time social work job.

I worked at the hospital three years. I loved the hospital work and was sorry to leave it, but I knew I had a responsibility to return to the community and continue with what I had started with my small experimental arts company which we now called 'social service arts'.

### **MELTDOWN/GOOD SHEPHERD**

While working at the hospital, our teen theatre company at Good Shepherd continued weekly acting classes. This work led to further work with the gangs of East New York and work in community and family shelters. Everywhere I worked plays were developed reflecting the lives of young people and their families.

Meltdown worked throughout New York as a consultant providing Violence Prevention and Education. Our young people would perform in community fairs, churches, and schools. Later in my work with the homeless, the same theatre techniques were employed to empower the participants to find their voice through theatre and present to others as a means of advocating for themselves and provide violence prevention education.

This work was radical as it called participants to go to the root of their soul, to the root of the action, to be honest, to define and re-define themselves and to have the courage to present their truth in public performance to the greater community. Radical action that involved the head and the heart.

The early teen theatre work was funded by Mayor Dinkins' *Stop the Violence Fund* that initiated the work of many other community organizations to fight and address teen dating violence. I was part of the Mayor's initial task force to address this issue. Once we performed in the community area of the Public Housing in East New York, one of the police officers pulled me aside, saying he had never seen anyone engage gang members like I did. This cop was truly amazed. They couldn't get these kids to participate in anything. From the audience I pulled the 'gang members' into acting scenes on family violence. They were great. The work was truthful; it went to the root of their soul.

## **SHELTERS**

Meltdown utilized this same theatre process in the work with the women of the Park Slope Armory in addressing the NIMBY crisis. This volunteer theatre group began while in graduate school. The city's Re-Use study for the Armory had begun. My fellow social work student colleague, Laura Metallo and I wanted to work with the women at the shelter, advocate for them and bring their voices into the ongoing community dialogue. We met controversy. We fought hard and we lost, however we continued. Meltdown continued as the local YWCA provided a space for the teen program and the Park Slope Armory is still there. Maybe we didn't lose.

**BrooklynWAVE (Brooklyn Women Against Violence Everywhere)**, a Meltdown program that evolved from *Voices of The Armory*). Discussions on race prevailed as Meltdown has an upcoming performance at the precinct. The flyer announced the Meltdown Players performing scenes on relationship violence and racism. The event is entitled Public Safety. Under the title of the event is the question, "What can we do to create a safe environment?" The DA's office is introducing The Safe Haven program, and the police captain is discussing improvements in community policing.

**(1997 Journal Note) At BrooklynWAVE** meetings we have talked about the different ways of perceiving safety. I talked of "feeling safe." The police mean safe streets. Laura talked of women who never feel safe even with people they love. Certainly, the resistance to recognizing domestic violence is historic and our performances increase awareness and help create a more compassionate community or at least, that is why we do it.

I am worried that the short scenes we will produce will not have the power or the passion needed. The teens can do teen dating violence and possibly a monologue from *Voices of the Armory*.

Earlier in the day I had asked one of the women who applied for the position in the pre-vocational training program if she was comfortable talking to white people about race. This woman is a shelter resident. She said she never had. I felt that the discussions in the office were important and yet I approach all this with caution. Recently at the counseling center where I work one of the black therapists had accused me of digging up trouble by mentioning race. I also recall comments made at other times during my career in social work when I would point out the necessity of confronting race in my work with young people. Other workers not of my color, said, I must answer those questions for myself. Implying that if I mentioned it then it must be that it was only my problem; that I was the white racist and it was not their concern. The hostility of race is so quick to surface.

I have struggled with this. Initially, I was angered and hurt when people said I was racist because I wanted to talk about racism. I'm over that. Now when it happens it doesn't anger me. I can't say I accept it because I think there is a real danger in accepting too much. Then one becomes one of those liberal progressives that perpetuate the system with understanding that no one appreciates.

Anger can be very constructive. It is important to recognize and utilize as a tool to understanding. As a social worker, I am learning to be cool; to accept this and that; try not to get in people's way too much; to guide, if anything, people to their own solutions; to offer support and love the unloved and to challenge the system. Although I think challenging the system is more a part of my art which is also my social work. Regardless sometimes I screw up.

### **LIFE MOVES IN...FAMILY**

Meltdown eventually melted when my father died, and I had to leave New York to take care of my mother. Meltdown was a small not-for-profit and not strong enough to continue without a strong leader.

Meltdown melted. 2001 marks the end of that dream.

### **JOHN HEUSS HOUSE – LOWER MANHATTAN POST 9/11**

In the year 2000 after my father's death and approximately a year in Pittsburgh trying to keep my mother in the family house, (my sister Stephanie stepped in when I was out of money and took her to an assisted living setting in Phoenix), I returned to New York I was hired as the art therapist at John Heuss House (JHH).

John Heuss House was a drop-in Center in lower Manhattan. It was a program that was part of Trinity Church, located in the basement, below the Department of Sanitation on Beaver Street. It was a drop-in for the mentally ill and fragile homeless. After 9/11 this was the only place not evacuated from lower Manhattan. This fragile bunch of homeless were not going to be put up in the W Hotel like other evacuated residents. Somehow in those early hours they got through the police barricades and returned to this basement, their home. Those of us who worked there had to be escorted by special police escorts into the cordoned off area.

My job was to help all staff and clients cope with this crisis. In newsletters, writings and in plays, we created a play called *Survival NYC* which we presented at community groups and in conferences to bring the voices of this disenfranchised population into the national healing.

### **PARTNERSHIP FOR THE HOMELESS – 23<sup>rd</sup> STREET**

Following JHH, I was hired by a drop-in for homeless senior citizens. Peter's Place was a program of the Partnership for the Homeless. My job was again to empower and advocate.

When I arrived, the homeless seniors sat in these rather large bariatric chairs, tall backs covered in fake leather/plastic in the basement of a church on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. The chairs were arranged in rows facing the large flatscreen TV at the center of the back wall.

The seniors kept their possessions in tall lockers and in plastic bags under the chairs. At the center of the floor a large section was filled with extra bags that could not be fit into the lockers. The clients were asked to discard all that did not fit in lockers and maintenance removed these bags. This area became my office. The rest of the staff offices were separate on a raised area above the main floor. This was the same as in JHH, the staff was always in a segregated area.

My job was to engage the homeless in groups and activities. Here my title was Recreation Therapist. The Director who hired me having seen my work at JHH was 'let go' before I arrived. The place was without strong leadership and when I came not only did I take over the space wherein their precious possessions were held, I rearranged their chairs in circles so they were able to talk or at least see each other.

To begin, I ran theatre groups. Who are you and why are you here? And people began to talk. I, as director, began to have a focus on who the clients were and how to help. We also had art and current events and special movies and discussions related to race and poverty. Affordable housing and agism, sexism and the homeless crisis resulting in unfair treatment and evictions became our issue for advocacy. And we created

a play, *Hope an Action* which again we presented to other shelters and churches and conferences addressing the affordable housing crisis in NYC.

Radical Action: The complacent seniors were now talking, arguing, acting, listening to music, singing, dancing. I invited performance groups in. Weekly we had cabaret singers join us. Clients would sing and dance.

When I was first hired. I re-painted the basement. I washed the windows. I painted it bright blue, white, yellow rather than weird institutional green. Some of the clients helped. I started the groups and re-arranged the chairs. Most were just amazed that this white lady was painting the basement and washing the windows. Then some of the more able-bodied clients volunteered to help. None of the staff. We created a client library, reclaiming a junk room that staff used as a lunchroom. I made what my mentor Roselle Kurland, author of many books on group work, professor at Hunter College School of Social Work and the beloved editor of *The Social Group Work Journal* would call "a joyful noise." I had enormous informal power as we revolutionized the space.

Eventually a new director was hired, and I was fired. They said it was "restructuring". The radical social worker upset the system a little too much. It was too noisy.

The drop-in no longer exists. Mayor Bloomberg cut funding and most drop-ins for specialized populations such as seniors or the mentally ill and fragile closed. Those served were expected to be folded into the larger homeless shelters.

### **BROOKLYN HOSPITAL- 2005**

In 2005 I returned to the hospital. I was once again hired to be a discharge planner. I worked on the unit where there were nursing home patients on ventilators that no one visited. On this unit, which was what was called a step down from the Intensive Care Unit there were at least 15 people on vents. These patients had no visitors.

Eventually I became aware of the status of these patients as "isolated and incapacitated" and that the hospital Ethics Committee would represent them. I expressed my concern and interest and became part of the Bioethics Committee. Eventually the Palliative Care Consulting Service evolved from the Ethics Committee. It began with a small grant for a palliative care social worker, me, to work half time.

With further grants we eventually had a half time physician and then a nurse practitioner. Palliative care evolved over the past 10 years. We have had three doctors, three nurse practitioners and I continued as social worker.

I developed a Physician Communication Training Program (PCTP) utilizing theatre to help the Residents give bad news and discuss end of life issues with patient and families.

I am happy and proud that the PCTP is a part of medical training. Emotion is recognized within the confines of an acute care hospital and within the rigid standard of medical education as an important key to communication.

The PCTP is radical action. "Despite myself I can only be myself" (to quote my first autobiographical play). As an artist I always had a commitment to use my art to help others. They say to teach what you know. This is what I know. Theatre is a major tool to help people connect with themselves and others. It provides amazing experiential learning. It is fun and sometimes great art.

Once in the basement of John Heuss House, the lower Manhattan drop-in, a client asked me to help secure a bucket so he could complete his job mopping the floor (I supervised the work program). At the time I was also running the theatre group and another client, a former Duke Ellington singer, was conducting an amazing acting exercise. I remember saying, "Give me a minute...Can't you tell I'm in the middle of a great

work.” The beautiful craziness of my life in these basements and later in my work with the residents at the hospital often felt like this.

A few of the plays written and developed are included as they best represent the actual dialogue incurred and the struggle of the participants. They are *Voices of The Armory*, the story of the women residents of the Park Slope Armory, *Survival NYC* representing the clients of lower Manhattan drop-in shelter post 9/11 and *Hope an Action*, the story of the homeless senior citizens and the affordable housing crisis.