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SOULS IN MOTION: CREATIVITY AND COMMUNITY IN A HARLEM WORKSHOP

Julia Demaree-Raboteau, Orthodox artist and long-time New York resident, is the co-director of Souls in Motion, a Harlem workshop for the mentally ill that she developed and sustained for two decades with her long-time friend and co-worker, Louise Rosenberg. Road to Emmaus first met Julia over a decade ago at the annual Orthodox “African Roots of Ancient Christianity” Conferences in Kansas City, Missouri, with her husband, Professor Albert Raboteau of Princeton. After the 2007 repose of Fr. David Kirk, Albert and Julia served as co-chairs of the board of directors of Emmaus House in Harlem.

The Birth of “Souls”

RTE: Julia, how did you first get involved with Souls in Motion?

JULIA: In 1987, I was a street artist in New York. I had made a series of collapsible paper tents that people could put over their heads and hold like umbrellas and walk around in. It wasn't my intention, but they turned out to function like confessionals. People would approach asking about the tents, but before you knew it, they'd be telling you their life stories. I called this project “Population X,” and it became a transition from my art studio to the street. I began to relish the interaction with people more than making art.

I was limping along financially, so I went to work for Hospital Audiences (HAI), an organization that sends artists, actors, and musicians to over 250 sites in the New York area to work with the mentally ill and the homeless. I ended up in Harlem, at an adult psychiatric rehabilitation center called Community Support System (CSS), a haven for people with psychological challenges. From the moment I arrived, I sensed that something major was about to shift in my life. As I was getting oriented, a client poked his head through the open door—actually he was leaning diagonally across the door-



Population X: Street Art in New York, 1987.

way—tipped his hat and said, “I’m William Turner—who are you?” At that moment, I fell in love. I felt like I’d come home.

I found that many clients attended the facility daily, but without much enthusiasm for their lives. They would sit around chain-smoking, drinking coffee,

and playing cards, and in the months that followed, I became a bit of a pied piper, determined to wake everyone up. It was a very cramped site—no windows or real fire escape—but there was a ping-pong table, so we started having the art classes on the table.

I was completely taken by this awakening process. I remember Louis, who spent six weeks on one drawing. He had wanted to be an architect, so he drew a house on graph paper with blue and green pencils that a full-time staff person kept in her top drawer for him during the days I wasn’t there. Another “sleeping” artist was Mr. Fu, our only Chinese client. When he was in Chinatown with his family he was a Buddhist, but when he was in Harlem with us he was a Christian. He also turned out to be quite the watercolor artist. I would set up still-life arrangements for him and he would paint them during the week. After a while, Mr. Fu had enough work to have a one-man show at the center that we ushered in with great fanfare. In all his shyness, he cut the ribbon at the opening with a big grin on his face.

Dr. Todman, the director of CSS at that time, and also a professor at New York’s New School, wanted to improve the quality of the clients’ lives and was encouraging innovations. After three months, he offered me regular part-time work that soon became a full-time job. A year later, I met an art-

Opposite: Julia Demeree Raboteau.



ist named Louise Rosenberg, who had come to visit the room. I was sitting on the floor on a quilt I was making with one of the clients and she just got down with us and took over. I felt as if I'd known her my whole life, and she came to work with us soon after. We've been working together now for over twenty years.

Dr. Todman had a vision of having the clients involved in cottage industries. He also began a lot of classes: about reading subway maps, managing anger, identifying signs and symptoms for their various illnesses, men and women's groups, even a Spanish class.... In those days we had a larger staff—two psychiatrists, a full-time nurse, altogether twelve people—but over the years the numbers diminished. It's hard to replace people because salaries are low, but somehow we always manage, often enriched by a steady supply of interns from the colleges in the city.

The wonderful thing about this center is that it's run like a family. Anyone who passes the referral process can come, and even if they leave or get kicked out, they can come back and try again. Mr. Willie James Prescott, who has been the director for the last nine years, is phenomenal. He has been on the staff of the program for 29 years, since CSS' beginning, and knows every single person who has ever come through the door. He's a strong father figure and challenges them to identify their problems, to cope with them, and to find a way to surpass them. Although this interview is about Souls in Motion, it is Mr. Prescott, in fact, who sets the tone of the family for the whole program. It's a joy to work with someone with so much integrity.

Never Enough Kindness

RTE: I imagine that it takes a great deal of experience, tact, and intuition to respond to such severely ill people, and it must take great courage on their part to come to the program.

JULIA: A person who carries the mental illness label in our culture does not feel welcome or comfortable in many places. Our center is a welcoming place of safety and provides stability for folks that are coldly marginalized by our society. Believe me, many wait at the door in the morning long before we open up. We used to be open five days a week, but felt the need to add a weekend program some years back. We are grateful that we have been able to offer comprehensive services in a compassionate way for nearly three

decades. This is not the case in most places, and the current political and economic climate indicates that some serious cuts are on the way that could challenge the quality of our program.

We all need to be loved and respected. I look at "mental illness" on a continuum. In times of extreme stress, and with no support system, we can all fold and become disoriented. For our folks, that kind of stress began very early in their lives, and their environment reinforced their insecurity. I definitely have the "genes" for mental illness in my family, but was fortunate to have a stable, nurturing background. The nature/nurture argument has been going on in a black and white fashion for years, but our place is to simply take a stand in the present moment, with all its grey ambiguities, and to respect and love a person in all their brokenness.

We have emotional outbursts in our program, but because respect and genuine caring are factored into the relationship we have with our clients, these outbursts can usually be dealt with without hospitalization and used as an opportunity to grow. Most of our folks are on low doses of medication and many meltdowns can be the result of their going off their meds. But, of course, the stressors for our people are many: threatened loss of housing, feelings of isolation and low self-esteem, paranoia in just traveling the street to get home, loss of identity cards, and these days, a nation and a world that is unraveling economically.

We all know about the lack of kindness in this world. There is never enough of it. Louise and I understood that to do our work we had to start being kinder to ourselves, to each other, and to other staff people who were sometimes jealous of us because we were innovating, especially in the early years. It's been and continues to be a spiritual struggle. We also know that in spite of all of the practical on-the-job training we've had, it is the hugging that really makes the difference—genuine kindness is missing in most human relationships. In this harsh world we are poised in survival mode most of the time, to defend ourselves and not to yield to others.

Arts of the Spirit

Not long after we began, the program relocated to a former public school building in Harlem on West 127th Street between Lenox and Adam Clayton Powell. Before we moved, Courtney, a fellow staff person, said to us, "You guys are really doing something special. You need to celebrate this, to name



it.” The moment he suggested it, we knew it was going to be “Souls in Motion.” Our work was and is about waking up the spirit and keeping it alive.

CSS was given the annex building and the cafeteria, with use of the auditorium and gymnasium for the main part of the program. We moved into an huge empty L-shaped space in the basement. Louise and I brought art and sewing supplies from our own studios, found furniture on the street and the Souls workshop space was launched. Our former storage space initially had gas fumes, electrical malfunctioning, and flooding, but that has steadily improved.

As the years went by, Louise, a former fashion designer, took over most of the sewing projects and introduced healthy cooking. She would lug organic grains and vegetables from Greenwich Village up to Harlem and cook breakfast and lunch. All of this activity was done on hotplates. We snagged a few people, but most of the clients would politely eat with us and then go into the main dining hall to get their regular meal from Harlem Hospital—food they were used to. Still there were a few people over the years who valued our food. Louise’s maternal presence anchored the room then as it still does today.

For one season, Louise and Lorna, one of our clients, had a moving food cart featuring fish chowder and cornbread—all organic and simply delicious. Never one to compromise, Louise ground her own cornmeal. It didn’t catch on in the building where we had hoped to sell to people working with other social services, but the clients really liked it and would pay fifty cents for a bowl. We broke even. Most of our cottage industries were labor intensive and we were never able to sustain them for long or make much money.

I was in charge of developing and maintaining the physical space, and the art. Whenever a client asked to be part of the workshop, we would ask them what they wanted to do, and then help make that happen. We never used any kits or pre-packaged projects but insisted that everything be made from scratch. They would be assigned their own work space and I’d make sure they had the arts and craft supplies that they needed. Most of these people worked with us every day. We also had visiting artists-in-residence who were sensitive to our artists’ endeavors. Our clients were pleased to have recognized artists working alongside them.

We also provided work stations in the room for those who only wanted to be with us part of the time. There would be a rocking chair for the client-philosopher, a three-dimensional chessboard, a boom box with earphones

Opposite: Julia Demeree Raboteau and Louise Rosenberg.

for the music lover, and plenty of books for the curious. People learned to respect the work stations and loud noises were discouraged. The TV was only used for scheduled movie watching. Cozy seating areas were available for the volunteers engaged in one-to-one exchanges.

I eventually took charge of the CSS garden that had been abandoned a few years before and that an agency could “rent” from the city for one dollar a year. It had become a dumping ground and a center for drug-dealing, and retrieving it took a lot of work. Initially, I had a lot of help cleaning it up, securing a fence and building the raised beds. Operation Green Thumb provided us with tools, seeds, plants, and soil. We planted and tended champagne grapes, raspberries, dwarf fruit trees, gourds, herbs, flowers, Chinese luffas, and long beans—it was quite a production.

William, the hat-tipper on my first day, and I became the primary urban gardeners. Only a few people wanted to get their hands dirty and farm with us, but many enjoyed the beauty and peacefulness, and came to sit under the little arched niches of moonflowers and morning glories. Children from the Montessori school across the street joined us, and they collected their own seeds from the plants they tended. They would march in early in the morning all decked out in African clothes saying, “Hello, Mr. William. Hello, Miss Julia.” To be gardening on the job in Harlem from March to November—what a wonderful ten years those were!

William was amazing. As soon as he came into the garden in the morning, the psychosis would fall from his shoulders. There would be no talk of illness or anything troubling for as long as we were out there, and then everything would change as soon as we returned to the room.

In the late 80’s, we also began publishing small books with everyone’s poetry and prose, and it was at this point that I met my future husband, Albert Raboteau, who taught a journal-writing group called “The Soup Seminar.” Writing and sharing was followed by a bowl of soup made by Louise. Around this same time, another friend, sent from Hospital Audiences as I had been, came to do a theatre class and put on a wonderful production based on the African tale, “The People Who Could Fly.”

We think of the 90’s as our renaissance. The stranglehold of paperwork had not yet fully descended on us. We held annual holiday sales and featured quilts, aprons, dolls, books, potholders, poetry, small books and organic herbs. Friends would come for fellowship and for some serious shopping!

Opposite: William and Julia in the Souls in Motion garden.



Our workshop artisans were honored and pocketed some well-deserved change. Often there was live music or Gospel singing. One year, we even had an exhibit of our quilts at the Museum of Natural History in the Ethnic History Hall.

Animals have always been a part of our workshop. Initially, we had an aviary with songbirds designed by my son, and later, cages of gerbils, three red gliders in a huge aquarium, a silver-haired rabbit and Ballerina, the studio cat. Often our clients have had negative childhood experiences with animals, so our animals are doubly therapeutic for them. Jack, our rabbit, lived for twelve years and hopped around at will in our huge space. He was eulogized



Jack the rabbit, by a workshop client.

with drawings and text. Presently, we have Ballerina and Fred, an African land tortoise who, we are told, could live for 90 years.

Part of what makes the room work is the partnership that Louise and I have, and although we are very different, the clients have always mistaken us. She's fifteen years younger and has black curly hair, while I had short dish-brown hair (now gone grey), but they still called me Louise and her, Julia. We used to ask, "Why do you confuse us?" I thought it was because we are both Caucasian until, one day, someone said, "No, it's because you have the same spirit, so we get you mixed up."

Even so, we're different. Louise would listen to the clients by the hour. I'd be running around saying, "Louise, we've got lots of things to do," but she would just keep on listening. Over the years, we've exchanged roles and now I do more of the listening and she's learned more about action, so there's been this marvelous exchange from being together so long.

When we first began working together, I didn't know that Louise was terrified of me because I was assertive, always confronting problems. There were so many ghosts in my family that I've always been big on getting to the root of things. If I'd known she felt like this at the time I would have thought, "Gosh, and I'm sort of jealous of you because you can sit and listen to people for so long—I can't sit two minutes." So we had some spiritual warfare going on, but eventually, we began imitating each other like an old married couple.

Over twenty years down the road, we really relish our similarities and our differences.

This kind of interchange has helped generate a real community spirit. Along with the daily activities, we celebrate everyone's birthday, have memorial services for clients who have died, and we entertain the clients' children who come to visit from their foster care families. The room is very magical. It's a living theatre, a living museum. There have been so many lessons.

Lessons Learned

RTE: What have you learned?

JULIA: When I first came to Harlem I was in my late forties. I'd been an artist all my life, doing very rebellious, unique stuff. I had a major New York show in 1982 that was, remarkably, called "Bellevue '82." A mentally ill friend at the time had overdosed one night, and I saved his life by taking him to Bellevue Hospital. While he was there he wrote me a poem about the hospital. The show actually began with a photograph I took during one of my visits to him: four faux-Doric columns that had been truncated when the hospital was being renovated and put in a small courtyard on First Ave. This was the view that the psychiatric prisoners looked down on, so I did a performance piece about how the lens of these mentally ill prisoners saw Greece in a truncated fashion—a marginalized view of a great civilization, much like they themselves exist in our western culture. We incorporated the poem with an exhibit, a performance, and a book, and the *New York Times* did a review.

The psychiatric world has always been on my mind. When I was fourteen, my father died a very violent death—he was both murdered and committed suicide, so I grew up in a world permeated with mental illness and mental anguish. I took it very seriously. So later, both the Bellevue performance piece and working in Harlem felt like homecomings. I had always wanted to go all the way with my own art, but there was something inside me that said, "This isn't it, Julia. This isn't going to satisfy you." Then, when I saw how facile the New York art and gallery scene was, I thought, "I can't be a part of this."

The Julia that went up to Harlem that first day was used to doing whatever she wanted to do. She could inspire other people and she could be kind, but only if things were going her way. She was quite arrogant in her views,



and it was amazing through the years to watch these things being chiseled away. I realized over time that I'd been ungrateful for most of my life, and I've learned that there are people who've been wounded much worse than myself. Over time, I learned that not everything can be conquered by action; sometimes you have to live with tension until things happen naturally.

Orthodox Souls

RTE: How did your Orthodoxy play into your work at Souls in Motion?

Julia: I'd never been part of any organized religion before—artists are often pretty independent—but after being at Souls in Motion, I'd come to realize that we are not meant to be “islands unto ourselves.” I began going to church with Albert in Manville, New Jersey, and eventually became an Orthodox Christian.

But, it was really Souls in Motion that prepared me for Orthodoxy, and especially my friend and gardening buddy, William, with whom I had many theological talks. He is a very devoted Christian who loves the Bible, and in some ways was my first spiritual father. Scripture was often quoted as we tilled the soil and turned the compost in the West 129th Street garden.

The orientation of Souls in Motion is very spiritual. Many of the clients are very bright, and most were wounded immeasurably early on. They are very watchful and aware of other people—partly to defend themselves, but also because they have empathy and compassion for other people's suffering. If someone hasn't experienced that compassion in their life, and comes into our community as a client or a staff person, you can see the magic of the place working on them.

Isolation is a huge problem for our people. Many of them hear voices, and have some form of paranoia, so community and trusting other people is very difficult. Because this is a warm and spiritually-driven place, there's a safety net for people to grow and reclaim themselves. Even though there's

God sometimes hides himself to teach us a lesson.

God's light is in me. It makes me happy. I thank God for this light. This light of love. It makes me strong. It illuminates me. It drives the shadows away. This light of love. This light of love.

Maxine's poem, Souls in Motion Workshop.

Opposite: Professor Albert Raboteau.

no overt “religion,” there are numerous occasions and instances of the Holy Spirit working.

Louise and I both attended acupuncture school, which made us aware of another whole level of trauma, and we were hoping to do acupuncture in the Souls in Motion room. This plan never worked out, but I extended that little area into a prayer shrine. We have Orthodox icons: Christ, the Mother of God, St. Moses the Black, St. Michael the Archangel and various other saints, including an icon with a very Indonesian flavor. This has become a place where people can go if they need to pray or to talk something out, or if they just need a quiet moment. We also have a small shrine with many pictures of the clients’ children, where one woman in particular would pray for each of the children every morning by name.

I learned how to pray in this room with these people. Their prayers are spontaneous, heartfelt, and very inspiring. There is often Gospel singing, and they are incredibly grateful to God for everything they’ve been given. As a middle-class white girl growing up in the U.S., I don’t know if you can ever get enough gratitude in you. I was brought up as the center of my mother’s universe, and I didn’t get the idea of family until I was soaked with these people.

I think that the most phenomenal thing about Orthodoxy is the Divine Liturgy. It is so deeply-rooted in our lives that it doesn’t budge, and this allows us to interiorize it and to refine ourselves in the process. Everything about life is about change, everything eludes us, everything leaves us, but this amazing service is still there. At first, I didn’t understand this and I thought, “How can they have the same liturgy every week?” But as the years went by, it became, “Thank God for this.” It is such an amazing gift.

Also, as my faith deepened, my shortcomings became more obvious. If you are living in community, there’s nowhere to hide, and by now I had three communities—Souls in Motion, the acupuncture community, and our church community in New Jersey. Everyone knows everyone else well; in real community, you are on display at all times. The clients, of course, can see you a mile off, and sense immediately what your state is. As we lift them up, they lift us up as well.

When I first realized that I would be with Albert, I was aghast at the prospect of moving to Princeton. I had spent most of my life wanting to live in New York City, and of course, had become very wedded to the city as Souls

Opposite: Julia and Louise.



in Motion flowered. I was baffled about why I was going to have to leave this city with its glorious diversity, but Al would say to me, “You know, it’s really important for these communities that are so different to get to know each other.”

RTE: How did you bring them together?

JULIA: With a series of visits. Five or six clients, who were close to us and rather independent, would sometimes come home with us on weekends. For instance, there’s Doris, who is in her eighties. She has absolutely no family, so she comes to visit us at Christmas and in the spring. This has really been marvelous, and when we have a special event, like a book publishing, our church puts on a celebration-dinner. Princeton is quite far from New York, but our church members are aware and help out in ways that they can.

Orthodoxy has deepened my spiritual life at Souls in Motion. We were already aware that our wounded people had spiritual as well as emotional and physical wounds, but having recourse to prayer, confession, and Holy Communion offers huge possibilities for healing. I know that Mother Theresa once said that she couldn’t do what she did without having Holy Communion every day of her life. It places a whole new framework on daily life when you know that you are serving other people’s souls, and not just their physical and emotional needs.

Souls in Motion, the Catholic Worker, and Emmaus House

RTE: Since Fr. David Kirk’s repose in 2007, you and your husband Albert are now co-chairs for his Emmaus House community in Harlem¹, helping the community find ways to continue his legacy. How did you get involved with Fr. David?

JULIA: Father John Garvey, an OCA priest, knew Fr. David and his Emmaus House shelter from the 60’s, and often told me that I should look him up—we were only seven blocks from each other, but we were so busy with our own lives that we only met him two years ago.

¹ Emmaus House, Harlem: Established by Fr. David Kirk in the 1960’s as a community for Harlem’s homeless men and women. Community life included work, education and spiritual renewal, and continues today on the same principles with which it began over forty years ago. Emmaus House is at West 127th Street between Lenox and Adam Clayton Powell. For the full story see, “The Road to Emmaus Runs Through Harlem” in *Road to Emmaus*, Issue #33, Spring, 2008.

Souls in Motion is about encouraging the creativity of a person through art, writing, gardening, animal care, and in personal relationships. Your creative juice is usually squeezed out of you when you’ve been wounded at a young age. You’re intent on surviving and just have to protect yourself; you don’t have the luxury to be creative. As I got to know Fr. David, I understood that he was getting people back on their feet and into the workforce, and that was a big difference between us. His people could handle some stress, but for ours, any stress is too much. The world folds in on them easily.

I’d moved to New York right before Dorothy Day died, and not long after I worked briefly at the Catholic Worker soup kitchen², where Fr. David’s work had its beginnings. I helped prepare and serve the soups, and you could still feel Dorothy’s presence in the house. One thing that really struck me at Emmaus House is that when Fr. David went up to Harlem to serve the poor, he made a change in Dorothy’s legacy. He kept the Catholic Worker idea of community, but instead of maintaining or just caring for the poor, he empowered them by sending them to school for degrees, to learn trades, and so on. But the common thread for all of us—the Catholic Worker, Emmaus House, and Souls in Motion—is to live and be defined by community.

There are very few ways that a person in our country, in Canada, or in western Europe can really be in community. Going to church on Sundays is different from being part of a daily community in which you give up a lot and take responsibility for things that you might not otherwise want to bother with. You have a commitment to other human beings, and you don’t define yourself as an individual, but as a member of a body where all of the parts learn to fit together.

So, it was a great pleasure three years ago, when my husband and I finally met Fr. David. I sat there listening to him and thought, “Oh, my gosh, this sounds so familiar, it’s really stunning.” The moment I walked into Emmaus House, I felt as if I was at Souls in Motion. It’s the same spirit, but one of the first things I noticed was that he had not just a few icons, but an entire Orthodox chapel next to the front door.

One difference between us is that Fr. David didn’t take any government money (except for one short period, which he later called “a mistake”). He did

² Dorothy Day (1897-1980): Founder of the Catholic Worker Movement with Peter Maurin in 1933 in New York City. Today there are over 185 Catholic Worker communities whose members live in common and are committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, hospitality for the homeless, and who work against injustice, war, racism and violence. The New York St. Joseph House, where Dorothy Day worked, is at 36 E. 1st St. (between 1st and 2nd Ave.). Dorothy also inspired Fr. David Kirk to begin Emmaus House/ Harlem in the early 1960’s.



this work by the grace of God, for forty years. He told us stories about times they were so broke that they were really down to nothing, and a baroness or a famous singer would pull up outside the house and give them a check for \$10,000. On the other hand our people are all on SSI. They have to have their government checks because they are on medication, and unfortunately they often end up in a mindset of being taken care of by strangers. But it's been remarkable to me that even within this structured system, Louise and I have been allowed to carry on the way we do. We've been given great latitude to have prayer corners, to have animals, to have time to sit and listen and pray.

Mirrors Around Us

RTE: Will you explain a little more about this mindset of being taken care of by strangers?

JULIA: Yes, it's an interesting thing. Most professional people are taught to "maintain" people, to be their caretakers, to take an "us and them" approach. Conversely, a person who is maintained on government money and is used to having their identity defined by their charts, often believes that the person who is writing them up in the chart knows more about them than they know about themselves. This is a mindset that keeps folks dependent on others, even for their identity. Think of the state of mind William had when he came back to the room from the garden.

Louise and I never had those mental constructs, nor did Father David. We went in another direction. Although I read our people's charts and am aware of their histories, that knowledge isn't what motivates me to relate to them. We are constantly teasing positive things out of them that have been dormant for years, possibilities that are just waiting for fresh air, an open door, and permission to go through it.

Of course, the clients could feel that open spirit in us and as the years went by it really bonded all of us. We were criticized by some of the trained staff for being too familiar, but we felt that closeness was imperative to address the deep wounds that they were rehearsing over and over again. We needed to try to help stop that cycle. No one became so independent that they could leave and be on their own, but the quality of their lives and the range of their expression broadened, and we have witnessed many people who have

Opposite: Fr. David Kirk, Emmaus House, Harlem, 2007.

discovered they can produce beautiful things, become more spontaneous in their reactions, and have more self-respect.

The Souls in Motion room is a quieter place now than in its first decades. A lot of our people are getting older and have many medical problems, so we are listening more than ever. Of the first generation that Louise and I were so close to, over half have died. Psychiatric medication allows them to live in the world by decreasing their stress and helping to manage paranoia and voices, but with medication there is a price to pay of interior aging. That premature aging, combined with a poor diet, drugs, diabetes, and hypertension means that many die relatively young.

William: Gardener and Prophet

RTE: I'm sure you have a twenty-year backlog of wonderful stories. Can you tell us about some of your close relationships and experiences at Souls in Motion?

JULIA: Yes, I'd love to. In 1988, early in my friendship with William (the gardener), I was invited to become part of an artist's symposium at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, "Flashback to the Sixties," along with some famous New York artists. I told them what I was doing at Souls, and that I would come if my presentation could involve my work there, namely bringing one of my clients to co-present.

At that time William was living in a shelter in the Bowery. He had no money, although he was also the only client I know of who had actually held a job for twenty years. At 16, he had been given a full scholarship to Brandeis University, but went into the Marines instead because his family didn't have enough money to pay for his college room and board. After the Marines, he worked for the post office, in spite of all of his hospitalizations. But even in his worst periods, William was very clear on who God was, that God was love, and William very much loved the Bible.



William's drawing of Julia and Louise in nurse's uniforms. 1989.



So when I received this invitation, I suggested to William that we do a slide show together called, "A Day in the Life of William". I told him, "I'll meet you early in the morning in the Bowery and we'll shoot slides all the way up to Harlem." He agreed.

I was a street artist in those days, and the dumpsters in New York often held treasures, so at one point I climbed up the steps of a dumpster to see if there was anything great to be found. William was watching me from the street and started laughing uproariously. "OK," he said, "Now I understand why you're my worker." It was adorable. That comment was prophetic because he already sensed that this was not going to be the usual social worker-client relationship. He, Louise, and I were in it together, fully engaged in the perils of being human.

So William and I went on this amazing trip to North Carolina. We traveled by Amtrak, and at the symposium William had his own room. To my knowledge, William doesn't sleep; in fact he spends most of his time praying for people around the world. He's up on every scrap of news, and knows exactly what's happening everywhere. That first night he woke me up at 2:00 in the morning to ask, "Oh, my gosh. Do you have your TV on? ...Such and such happened in Guatemala, and there's a huge problem in Siberia."

I said, "Actually William, I was sleeping. Don't you need to sleep?" He replied, "I've already had three hot showers..." I said, "Well, I'll sleep a little more and then I'll pick you up for a nice early breakfast before you present your slideshow." The next morning, I talked a little about Souls in Motion, but William did most of the presentation and he was fantastic.

After the slide show, the audience went into another room where William was exhibiting his dream drawings. One in particular was of a prophetic dream he'd had the night before the Berlin Wall fell. Just before it was announced on the news, he dreamt that Louise and I were standing next to the wall in nurse's outfits, while he was flying over the wall like Superman. We loved this drawing so much that we use it as our calling card.

I'd spent the previous year trying to convince William to save some of his money. He had been raised to serve other people, though, so he would turn over his entire pension and disability paycheck to his wife and child each month, while he lived in poverty in the Bowery. He had been staying in a dormitory shelter, and had recently graduated up to a "cage". If you got a cage, it meant that you stayed in the main room with everyone else, but that you literally slept inside a chain-link fenced cage. You could lock it, and your

things would be safe. I had been talking to him about keeping \$25 a month for himself, and he'd been thinking about this for some time.

On the way back on the train, we were both sitting in aisle seats, and at one point his hand reached out. As we held hands across the aisle, he said, "Julia, I think I'm ready to keep about \$100 a month for me." I said, "William, I'm going to cry." Eventually, that became \$400, and Louise and I were able to find him a room in a building for people who had been homeless. The day he moved in, he packed everything he owned into two garbage bags, and we taxied up to Harlem. We helped fix up his room, and soon he was reunited with his son, who would come and visit him there.

After William and I began the garden, another client named Patricia decided that she wanted to garden too and she came with us each morning. She had long beautiful tapered fingers, and although I'd just carelessly throw the seeds into the rows, she would meticulously place them in the soil, one by one. She was a very shy, isolated person and gardening was comforting to her.

Pat was from the South, as was William. Her mother had passed away some years before, and when I found out that she had never been to her mother's grave in North Carolina, I asked her if she would like to go. I contacted her grandmother who lived nearby and a psychiatric worker friend of mine from North Carolina for support. We invited William to come with us. He was like a benevolent older brother to her and the three of us took the train south. We prayed at the grave, and Patricia cried. There was a lot of healing for her, and afterwards we came back and gardened together until the late 90's when the City gardens were taken by Mayor Giuliani for building sites. Later, Pat developed cancer and passed away; for William and I it was like losing a sister and daughter, we'd been so close to her.

Frank: Artist and Entrepreneur

Another client we are very close to, and who is still in the room, is Frank. Frank was one of our rare clients who lived independently, and is the only one I knew of to have a dog. He acts like a loud ruffian, but, as with almost everyone else at Souls, he is incredibly deep and caring. Frank is very entrepreneurial. He collects things and then comes and badgers us to death to buy them, but he has a gift for spotting things that he knows we'll like, and so we usually do buy them.



One day he did some artwork that was so original that I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I said, "You have quite a gift, why don't you do more?" He replied, "Teach, how can I do that? I'm worried about surviving. If you really want to help me, come to my apartment and help me fix it." So that led to another project. Frank couldn't sleep because he heard voices in his room and thought that they were coming through pinholes in the wall, and he had laboriously tarred over all of the pinholes. Nothing we could ever figure out helped those voices, but we tried. To this day he is still making amazing things, another old soul who has been with us all these years.

Mary, the "Bummie Nose" Doll-Maker

Another very creative person was a young woman named Mary, who told us that her grandmother had "made things," and that she also wanted to make things. She was busy every minute of the day, but the problem was that her things would often fall apart because they were done so quickly. Louise and I would come behind her, trying to patch them up. We tried one project after another, until we finally settled on doll-making. Everyone in the room who was a regular part of the studio had their own workspace, and Mary wanted to be right next to Louise, so that became the doll-making center.

After the dolls were up and running, they were so captivating that I took some down to a little children's store on the lower East Side, and the owner decided to carry them. I helped out for a while on the clothes and faces to make them sellable, but Mary got hundreds of dolls ahead of me, until there were piles and piles of dolls waiting for faces and clothes. They were popular and beautiful, and, over the years, the hair styles that Mary created for them became more and more amazing.

Mary had a word that she used as a term of endearment—"bummie-nose." If you were in her ballpark, she would affectionately call you, "bummie-nose." It was sort of a marker with Mary, and it was interesting to see who became an instant bummie-nose and who had to wait to become a bummie-nose. She couldn't figure out my husband Albert, who came to the room for years to teach his writing group. He had to wait a whole year and a half before she would call him bummie-nose.

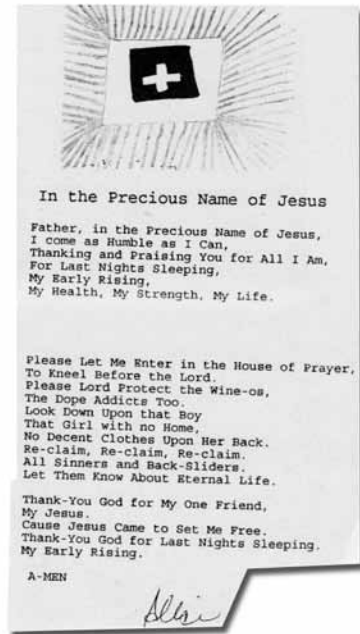
Opposite: Mary and her "Bummie Nose" Dolls, Souls in Motion.

William G.: Orange Pies and Dinosaurs

William G. was probably the client who best understood the creative spirit underlying the room. He was very sophisticated and, at the same time, very modest. William had been to almost every museum in the metropolitan area and all of the boroughs, and would constantly bring fliers. He was another person who didn't sleep and when he found out that I liked "orange pies"—

yams, sweet potatoes, squash—he would bake them from scratch. Often he'd bake at 3:00 in the morning and then bring them in warm. Usually they arrived upside down, so Louise decided to get him a Martha Stewart pie carrier that would carry two pies at a time on racks. He was very proud of his carrier but, although we never understood how, even then, the pies would be upside down when he arrived. Although we had much philosophical discourse, William G. was a complete enigma. CSS never had any kind of history on him because you simply couldn't get anything concrete out of him.

I have to say that William was the apple of my eye because he made art the way I made art. He found value in every scrap of material; in fact, the scrappier



Alice's poem, *Souls in Motion*.

the material, the more delighted he was. He had a magical way of appearing in the room, and one day he showed up with a whole bag of plastic forks, of every possible color, and proceeded to make a plastic fork sculpture that was to die for. He would take his projects away, but we never found out what he did with them.

Later he made a dinosaur environment. I had bought him a couple of small dinosaurs and he found dozens more and made a whole landscape with hills and dinosaurs. Before we knew it, there was cotton batting over everything, so that the dinosaurs were emerging from white clouds of smoke. That also

Opposite: William G, standing before his portrait.



disappeared; it was huge, but we never found out where he took it. One piece that I will eventually bring home is made out of wooden thread spools that my mother had saved for decades. I'd brought them in one day, and William immediately snapped them up and made a most amazing sculpture with spools and electrical wire.

A few weeks later, we were celebrating Black History Month and William began appearing every morning clutching a sheaf of xeroxes. He was spending long hours in the library researching famous and obscure people from black history that none of us had ever heard of. I said, "OK, I can see that you are ready for your own space," and I gave him a wall to exhibit on. Within a week he had it completely studded with clippings about these people's lives. None of us had heard of any of them, but one morning he came in just beaming: "Oh, Madame Raboteau, look at this," and he showed me a picture of Albert. He said, "Al's famous!" He was so excited. So Al went up on the wall too.

Anne, our resident artist friend from Paris, painted William's portrait in the Souls in Motion room, and he was particularly excited about this because earlier he had attended the unveiling of Albert's portrait when Al became the Dean of Princeton's Graduate School. William had sat in a room with the president of Princeton and all of our family, and had his picture taken with Al next to the portrait.

William had a real understanding of the transience of life, and always used to say, "We aren't going to be here long..." but he loved all of these manifestations, these mirrors of reality: his own portrait, Al's portrait, work from our room. One day, he found some matboard frames in our studio, and asked me to photograph him holding the frame around his face, while he wore the same outfit he had worn for his portrait. In his other hand, he held one of our greeting cards with a client's artwork.

When he told me about it, he was just grinning his head off, and I said, "I think you've found another art form, William." The day that I was supposed to work with him on the project, however, we were having a lot of internal problems at the center and were very caught up in the politics. I told William that I was sorry, but I couldn't do it that day, that we would do it later, but that night he died in his sleep. We were all horrified; everyone had loved this man so much. He was such a huge person. I did a lot of soul-searching, and made a vow then that I would really try to honor people and keep the priorities straight. That was a huge spiritual teaching for me.

William's funeral was held on a sultry summer day in Harlem. All of his

relatives turned up, and every one of them stood up and gave a testimony. It took his death to find out about him. One of the things we hadn't known was that he had made it a point to visit every client from CSS who was ever hospitalized. I have his tiny dog-eared Bible and the pages are so worn out they are half-gone.

A week after his death, a new client came with a long hard history of drugs, but was soon transforming his addictions into making art. Over the weeks, he became aware of this portrait of William that Anne had left us, and one day asked, "Who is this person?" We told him about William. Not long after, I heard this new client Robert explaining his art to some visitors. "I want you to understand that I came a week after this other person died, and I'm sure that I was sent to take his place." I was stunned and said, "Alright, Louise, the Spirit is alive in the room."

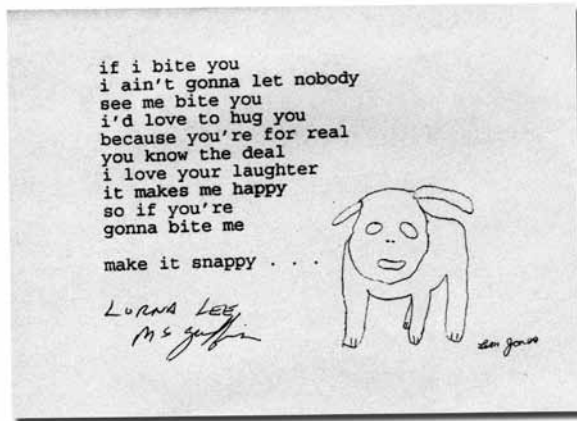
James and Ethel—A Married Couple

Most of our clients are single, but we do have a few married couples. James and Ethel are probably our most famous married couple. They have been together for years, through many ups and down, hospitalization, and both have been active in the studio. James had a special relationship with Jack, our rabbit, who allowed him to get close and pet him. Ethel has the most upbeat spirit, and can turn the most devastating situation into a blessing.

Both of them are open to telling their stories and we published the first part of Ethel's illustrated autobiography. The cover of her book is a drawing by Anne, our artist-in-residence, who also painted an oil portrait of them as a couple. Ethel's story is straightforward and charming. We held a book-signing party as we have for two other of our writers. She read from her book and the clients lined up to buy it.

Lorna: "If I Bite You"

When Lorna came to us she had never been involved in any program, but her best friend James brought her to us and it was love at first sight. Lorna said that she had always wanted two things in her life, to have her poetry published as a book (she had already had two poems published nationally) and to have her own card collection. I said, "Well, we can do anything we want here." So, Lorna's book became the first we published. I did the design



Lorna's poem, *Souls in Motion Workshop*.

work and put it together, and then we had a book-signing. Afterwards, she read her poems in different places.

Lorna became a real bulwark for the studio in a different sort of way. With her presence, prayer became very visible and audible in that room. It was palpable. That was when I made the small Orthodox shrine in the clothes closet and we would pray there together. She also became interested in peer counseling and advocating for other clients. She wrote one of her most famous poems, "If I Bite You," for William (the gardener) one day. William is so aware of everybody at every moment, and so worried that everything is about to fall apart, that we all take turns coaxing him out of his funks, and Lorna wrote this poem to make him laugh.

Joe and the Art of Monsters

The last client I will tell you about is Joe. Joe came to us years ago, when he was 25. A doctor from Harlem Hospital brought him to us in person and said, "This is a very special young man." Joe loved drawing monsters and told us that when he was very young the welfare lady had come to visit his mother and saw him drawing on a brown paper bag with some stubby old crayons. She said, "I'm going to bring some art supplies next time I come," and she did. This really fired him up and he used to have little shows in his bedroom and brought all of the neighborhood kids in to see his drawings. He is clearly an artist with a very unique vision. Of all of the clients in the room, he is the only one who would like to be known by the world and he asks questions like, "What does it mean to be famous?" and "Do you have to go to art school to be famous?"

RTE: Why does he only do monsters? To an outsider it might seem an indication of being troubled.

JULIA: No, I don't think so... There is a pathos about his monsters, they aren't aggressive, attacking monsters. Some of his old work is very elaborate and multi-layered, with lots and lots of figures. At the beginning they were all monsters, then they went through a period of becoming women, all women, then later the monsters came back, and then the robots appeared. Then there was a time where the monsters and the robots and the women were all together. That period always reminded me of Picasso, with his centaurs and women and everything mixed up together. Also, Louise with her great beauty and warmth was probably a muse for him.

Most of our artists only want to be known in our family circle, but Joe is very interested in becoming known in the world. He has shown his work in SoHo and other places, including a big show last year in Philadelphia. He is an incredibly sweet person with a great sense of humor and can be very articulate about his work—he loves it when people come to his shows and ask questions. For his first show we gave him the money to buy an outfit and he went out and got the most outrageous tuxedo I'd ever seen. That was with five other artists in SoHo, and he was clearly the event of the evening.

We also make cards from his works, and he sells the cards on the street. I'm determined to get him on the map, so that he can have a steady response to his work. We've had a rich history with him, and we've always felt like we could never finish *Souls in Motion* without putting him on the map.

Souls in Motion: A Living Museum

RTE: Looking back, how would you sum up the last twenty years?

JULIA: I don't think Louise or I ever sat down and thought that we were going to help people; we weren't trained social workers or psychiatrists. All we knew was that we wanted to give. At first, we had a lot of material things to give—we emptied everything out of our studios, and those things started to form the room. It became a marvelous commotion of giving. We were giving, we were getting, they were giving, they were taking, we were taking, we were giving ... it was just amazing when that spirit hit the room.

One of the most gratifying things for us is that both of the directors we've worked under knew that we weren't trained professionals, but they always trusted us. This was important in the kinds of relationships we were forming with our people. In the sense that we are all first and foremost spiritual

beings, we are all on an equal status. It wasn't "we and them." We didn't do that. Of course, there were times when we had to set a boundary; sometimes the clients set boundaries too, but they were always based on this mutual respect and love.

William (the gardener), for example, will drive us crazy when he gets very obsessive about wanting something, and then we have to set a boundary and the hair almost gets pulled ... but then we all sort of laugh and he will bring up a Bible quote, or remind us of some wonderfully hilarious event where we were all like family, and we move on.

Respect is really important for people who are usually not dealt with that way. As the years went by we became acutely aware that we were there to help ease their physical existence and the difficulties one has in a culture where economic conditions, color of skin, and mental status are evaluations. Being poor, black, and crazy makes people lead perilous lives. You don't just weave through life easily. Besides the art, we helped with everything from their daily routine and appointments to going to court with them, and all the while they were teaching us spiritually. Halfway through the twenty years, they began doing their physical stuff better and better, and we started becoming people of spirit. Louise and I were weaving our selves together by taking each other on, and we did the same with them. That was a beautiful exchange and it continues to amaze us.

Things have changed in the room over the years; life is about change. The staff diminished, case loads increased, I married Albert and moved to Princeton, so I'm no longer there five days a week. The spiritual community still holds, but Louise is taking the brunt of the activity in the room now. I've taken on more of a grand-mothering role, as people often just want to sit and talk to me about what's on their minds. Souls in Motion is a museum of life, with many artifacts, both manufactured and human, and each one is packed full of memories and spirit—a year, a month or a lifetime of them. This is what people mostly sense in our room. ✦

This interview is dedicated to Lorna, a long-time member of the Souls in Motion family, who reposed in April, 2009. Memory Eternal!

A Mother's Day Letter from William "the Gardener" to Julia Demaray Raboteau

Sunday, May 13, 2007

Julia, God has brought us through dangers, seen and unseen, He is able to keep us, and He knows better than we know. May God bless you for now and evermore.

You were in a room with a sewing machine and a desk. Then Louise got a sewing machine and a table. Victoria made a pot of cheese and macaroni and sold it for 10 cents a dish in a plastic bowl. Mr. Fu made waterpaints and Josephine played the piano. It was an old piano but she still played it. Later you made quilts and had an exhibition at the Museum of Natural History on Central Park West near 79th or 80th St., and we gardened together. Then my children were single. Now they are married, and you have grandchildren and Al's kids too. Your mother passed and your grandmother passed, but I used to write to your mother and she wrote back to me. Remember, she sent me a picture of the planet Saturn with its rings. Well, enough of reminiscing, but you are a wonderful person Julia, and Almighty God, the Creator of all things loves you and so do I. I'm glad I've had more than Ralph, Tika, and Annabel to take care of. You have family and Louise and Al and all your grandkids. You are the mother of many nations, you have great authority, and with authority comes responsibility.

Keep up the good work, have a good Mother's Day and every day put your trust in Almighty God, Creator of all things. The Scripture says if you need wisdom, ask for it; if you need a miracle, ask for it – believe and know that Almighty God can do it. He has kept us thus far and He can continue. When you pray, He can and will.

God bless your friends and relatives. Happy Mother's Day, Happy Father's Day, Happy Every Day. Be thankful every day. ✦