Remarkable lives: Clare Campbell in conversation with Jerome Carson.

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Title: Remarkable Lives: Clare Campbell in conversation with Jerome Carson.

Authors: Clare Campbell and Jerome Carson.

Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of the paper is to provide a profile of Clare Campbell.

Design/methodology/approach – Clare provides a short autobiographical account of her life. She is then interviewed by Jerome. She describes the life enhancing impact of creativity in her own life.

Findings – Clare describes her work initially with Wild Woman workshops and then Big Love Sista.

Research limitations/implications – Big Love Sista started when some 40 women all came and painted self-portraits in Clare’s house, which led to an exhibition of 100 life sized portraits on women in recovery from difficult life events.

Practical implications – Apart from the healing power of Art, Clare’s work shows the power of bringing leaders together with disadvantaged groups, using the medium of the circle to provide unique experiential change.

Social implications – Community leaders have access to lots of resources and opportunities. In coming together with disadvantaged groups, they can serve as role models, but equally they can be inspired by those they encounter in the medium of the circle.

Originality/value – Clare and those colleagues she has worked with over the years has shown the power of community and the transformative effects of groupwork. Few individuals can have had such a dramatic effect on so many people.

Keywords Circles Liverpool Art Depression Creativity Big Love Sista Big Love My Brother

Introduction

The first time I met Clare was in her studio in the Centre of Liverpool, which looks out across the city. The meeting, arranged through a mutual acquaintance, was to discuss how we might help evaluate her latest project, Big Love My Brother. This was a follow-on project to the very successful Big Love My Sista, which she had developed a few years earlier. She invited me to join the first Big Love My Brother workshop as a participant. Hence I was able to witness first-hand the amazing abilities of this woman and the highly professional colleagues she worked with. I joined in with “the lads and leaders” as we witnessed the transformative power of groupwork. Clare is not only a talented artist and group facilitator, but also an accomplished poet (Campbell, 2010).
Brief biography by Clare Campbell

“We are all dancing somewhere between derelict and divine”

I was born in Liverpool in 1973. It’s such a brilliant city full of hope and despite its bleakness and struggles at time it has great vision and spirit, this gritty landscape has mirrored my own life journey in many ways and I am so grateful for it.

I was aware from being very young of being deeply sensitive to feelings, emotions, to sensing energy and to the untold stories, fears, anger, disappointments and pain of those around me in my then small world. Maybe some of it was learning to sense what was happening, so I could keep myself safe in a house with a lot of anger where my free spirit felt squashed. From as long as I can remember, I was determined to keep my soul and spirit intact and came up with ways to protect myself and my creative core.

Most of the time I felt overwhelmed and really scared but I found my solace in creating, I created stories, songs, paintings and poems and whole new worlds that existed only in my imagination. This is was what saved me. I also had some key moments as a child of feeling a presence greater than myself surround me and protect me, and this helped me to know that however bleak things seemed, everything was going to be ok and that I would have a purpose in the world. This has been a constant in my life, this juicy deep personal comforting spirituality that has never left me.

My mum is an amazing woman. When I was young I watched closely her strategies for staying buoyant. She always had a network of friends who she would nurture and who would nourish her in turn and she reached out to everyone to make life a little better. I remember a very grumpy old man in our church, who kept himself to himself. My mum chipped away at friendship with him and found out he had been a doctor from Poland who had escaped the Holocaust and was haunted by that. My mum organised a big surprise birthday party for him to let him know he was loved. I was so deeply inspired by her kindness when I was young and the way she made things happen. She is still running around looking after the “old people” despite being in her 80s. I was deeply shaped by her approach.

I also found comfort in the local Catholic church. I loved the beauty of the rituals and the magic of the candles, the smell of the incense and the community. I was unhappy as a teenager and found healing in the poetry of belonging I found in that church building. I went on to study Theology at Leeds University and became inspired by Liberation and Feminist Theology and began to really challenge many of the limiting beliefs of my early upbringing.

I was in an abusive relationship at University, which had a big impact on me. It knocked my belief in myself and in the kindness of others and it confirmed what I had learnt as a child, that it wasn’t safe or possible for me to be truly me in the world and to be loved. I managed to leave but was in a deep depression for years until I found myself working in a women’s centre in Liverpool, where I fell in love with a remarkable lesbian woman who was a radical therapist
and encouraged me to do a diploma in Person Centred Counselling and to finally learn to speak from an authentic voice.

As a newly qualified therapist in Inner City Liverpool, I got a job as Women’s Worker with survivors of childhood sexual abuse and women in the mental health system with severe and enduring issues. I felt the system was severely restricting and the environment and staff set up both bullying and bad for my own mental health. I loved working with the women and began sharing my creative approaches in group therapy sessions and with clients. Meanwhile I was searching for more community and a connection with a tribe of my own. I dipped my toe into some alternative workshops, but found many of them very white middle class and often very heterosexual. There was too much expert versus client/participant going on and not enough juicy community. I longed for earthy sassy creative healing spaces and when I couldn’t find them I began to create them- even though I was terrified and still lacking in confidence. I travelled to America and sat in “circles” with brilliant men and women helping people to connect to their creativity and spirituality and was filled with inspiration. I began to run Wild Woman Workshops, which proved very popular and people asked me to go into their schools, prisons, workplaces, secure units, LGBT communities, homeless shelters, hostels and hospitals etc. I began to speak at conferences, advised, designed and facilitated courses within the Department for Work and Pensions and worked with clients in the mental health system. The work was radical and inspiring.

Somehow I was allowed in and given free rein to work in whatever way I wanted – wild women circles, retreats, bonfires, rituals, mask making, sacred labyrinths and stirring up cauldrons of creativity and alchemy ! Over the years I worked with over 20,000+ people sharing my stories and creativity, connecting communities, bringing in energy and feeling blessed by the incredible stories and transformations I witnessed. I showed up where I was called and often that was in the most unglamorous and gritty settings. It was there I found pure beauty of spirit, sassy courageous human beings and so much love. I learnt so much and found in the people I worked with a magnificence and grace that humbled me and shaped my approach to my life and work.

I became a voice which stirred up the “soup of institutions” in an irreverent way. I am grateful for my Liverpool heritage for allowing me to approach my work in a way that spoke to a wide range of people longing for change within systems and outside of them. I always sought to create spaces for those who felt marginalised. I wanted to hear their voices and stories.

Four years ago I again became very depressed and started to have severe anxiety. I was frightened to leave the house and I entered what’s known as the dark night of the soul. While recovering from this difficult breakdown and depression I started painting prolifically again. This somehow led to 40 women joining in and painting self-portraits in my tiny living room and then 100 of us!!! It was so healing that we wanted it to reach more women and approached prisons, secure units, mental health units and youth groups. Soon Big Love Sista CIC was born. Somehow I had created another not for profit social enterprise.
We were given funding from the Arts Council and our project got incredible feedback and became a two week exhibition in The Tate Gallery. The exhibition showcased 100 life size self-portraits of women in recovery from difficult life events. Accompanying merchandise, including affirmation card packs, were sold and money fed back into allowing more women to take part. We have now collected over 600 self-portraits and much of the work is commissioned by Public Health and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs). We received innovation funding from the CCG in Liverpool. We included women leaders in our project, helping to look at bringing together women from different walks of life to connect and speak about mental health and life in more creative ways. We also do projects with young women and are about to launch Big Love My Brother, bringing together young men from marginalised communities with male leaders from our region to paint together, tell their stories and look at ways to reduce isolation and tackle suicide rates among young men. I feel so grateful to be able to be free in my work and speak my truth and for my creative work to be being taken seriously by commissioning bodies.

Meanwhile I have returned to the joy of painting, which I learnt as a child was the perfect way to keep me in a good strong place. I have a beautiful studio in Liverpool which is a place of safety, inspiration, community and belonging. The little girl I was would be so comforted that I created such a life rich in magic and possibility.

Clare in conversation with Jerome

Jerome: Spirituality seems to be a theme throughout your life. How does it manifest itself for you these days?

Clare: My spirituality has remained the same constant magic throughout my life. It isn’t attached to any religion or dogma its simply about the wonder of being on this amazing crazy difficult but juicy planet ....I speak to God, the Universe, Goddess .... like I would a beloved friend .... It’s a deep knowing within myself of the sacredness of everything.

Jerome: You set up Big Love Sista. What have been the most important things to come out of this?

Clare: Big Love Sista has worked with over 1000 women and girls and I have had the privilege to witness, connect with all of them and share stories and threads of our lives... that will stay with me forever and of course the project leaves a legacy of creative work, friendships that will last a lifetime and tiny sparks of hope that have seen participants changed in a thousand ways...

Jerome: You mentioned bringing women leaders into your projects to work with other women from disadvantaged communities. How does this dynamic work?
Clare: We can’t work in isolation with one group to heal a whole community - change has to happen at all levels. At the end of the day the women who were from the groups identified as most vulnerable, were the most inspiring to the women leaders.... That’s often how it works... when we sit in circle and create together there is much less hierarchy... we hear each other’s stories and realise there are so many threads of someone else’s story that also run through our own....the women leaders were often more masked and took longer to speak their truth than the women from disadvantaged communities ... when you have nothing you have nothing to lose in being totally real.

Jerome: Why is Liverpool as a City so important to you?

Clare: Liverpool oozes hope... it’s been kicked about in the press for so long but it continues to be innovative, creative, gritty, real, brilliant and it’s full of such great characters .... wherever I go in the world people’s eyes light up when you say you are from Liverpool... it’s that kind of gorgeous bright vibe that makes me proud to be from Liverpool. It’s a city that’s survived and thrived. I like to think we can all draw inspiration from that.

Jerome: What is the connection between mental health and creativity?

Clare: Expression is the opposite of depression ...... I could write a thousand books on this but I’ll just say this instead!

Jerome: In what ways do painting and poetry help you personally?

Clare: When I am painting or writing I am totally in a bliss zone... It takes me out of this world into a space where I am most “ME” So I would go as far as to say creativity has saved me and shaped me and is me.

Jerome: What are your hopes for Big Love My Brother?

Clare: I hope that the lads and the leaders involved find a space where a new spark inside is lit and new connections are made. I am trusting that like with Big Love My Sista, amazing things will happen and it will be just the start ..... 

Jerome: What does the concept of hope mean for you?

Clare: Breathing into the next minute and then the next and trusting that something is happening that is quite magical however painful, mystifying, yukky, heartbreaking. Hope was part of deciding to carry on living even when every day was so dark and painful. I am nearly always frightened and always. always full of HOPE.

Jerome: What changes would you most like to see in mental health services?
Clare: I’d like to see it move from a medical model and for it to become much less expert = patient and much more human+human trying to find our way through it all together. Most people I meet within the mental health system have a heartbreaking story, which led them to this place .... we are all made up of stories. I am so grateful that Public Health Teams and CCGs have good people in them who believe in community and creativity - but they work within systems that are often unhealthy and damaging. I just keep doing what’s in my heart and what I believe in ...it’s no good just looking at what’s wrong. It’s my lives work to create juicy alternatives and walk my talk.

Jerome: What are your views on the use of medication for mental health problems?

Clare: I was on medication for a few months at the height of my anxiety and depression and it helped me stay alive. I am so grateful for that and I often share that with people who ask me what I think. But If I would have had safe, appropriate, effective, inspiring nurturing treatment offered at that time, would I have needed them? No, if someone would have sat me in a beautiful studio and put a canvas in front of me and helped me tell my story would I have needed them? No.

Jerome: Have you ever been inspired by any mental health professional that you have come across?

Clare: I could tell you a thousand stories of people who have survived the mental health system - they inspire me most.

Jerome: In terms of people with lived experience of mental health problems, have you been inspired by anyone you have met or read about?

Clare: Everyday...everyone....thousands of amazing brave women and men ...

Jerome: What challenges lie ahead for you? What would you most like to achieve in the future?

Clare: I just want to paint and paint and paint and keep working on softening my juicy Scouse heart so I can be more available, more real and more me with the people I love and the strangers I encounter. The challenge will be to curb my addiction for starting up new social enterprises and projects!

Jerome: What would you most like to be remembered for?

Clare: I can only hope that I remember myself and who I am and want to be on a daily basis ... it’s so easy to get distracted by the world. I think I don't care if I am remembered or not really I just want to make life as magical as I can while I am here - for myself and those whose stories intertwine with mine.
Conclusion
The first day of the two day experiential workshop was conducted in a yurt on Lord Leverhulme’s estate in Knowsley. It did indeed have bonfires, rituals and stirred up cauldrons of creativity and alchemy, as Clare suggested earlier. The second day was held in a Young People’s Centre, Knowsley Mutual. Clare had brought together a very diverse group of local community leaders with a group of young lads with a range of social and psychological problems. At the end the young lads wanted to come in one by one to thank the older men for giving up their weekends to spend the time with them. The older men, decided to reciprocate, and we all went in individually to let the young lads know what the weekend had meant for us. Having worked in mental health services for 32 years, I thought I had seen everything. I had not. This was different, special and unique. We still have to go back and paint our portraits and then there will be an exhibition of the work a couple of months later. Isaac Newton has been described as the last alchemist, however he was never an alchemist of the mind. Clare Campbell on the other hand... Hers is indeed a Remarkable Life.

Reference

About the authors
Clare Campbell is an artist and wild creative soul working alongside Public Health and CCG Teams on innovative projects. With a radical and irreverent approach, Clare carries poetry, hope, circle work, creativity and art to new audiences: from prisons to housing estates, government conferences to dole queues... reawakening lost dreams and inspiring a bigger vision of what is possible.

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