

Present in Becoming Be Present,® Inc.

By Carletta Joy Walker



In the mid 1980's, I attended my first Black & Female: What Is The Reality?® retreat facilitated by Lillie P. Allen. The retreat was held in Dahlonga, Georgia. Lillie's spirit had come to me earlier by way of Catherine [Sanders] Lamkin and others attending and participating in the first Black & Female: What Is the Reality workshop; a core part of the 1983 conference on Black Women's health.

When I say, "Lillie's spirit had come to me by way of..." I am saying I felt the integrity of the energy coming from the conference and particularly of the Black & Female: What Is the Reality Workshop.

The model Lillie created, practiced, and evolved in and with a collaborative community of practice, starting with herself, and Black Women became the Be Present Empowerment Model™. Three threads weaving a whole, practiced in steps taken simultaneously, separately, or in alternating order:

- Know yourself outside the distress (and history of distress) of oppression
- Listen to others in a Conscious and Present state
- Build Effective Relationships and Sustain True Alliances

Three threads supported with and by a community of practice wherein co-participants get to know, learn, say, teach, work together and be people functioning outside of the distress of oppression. People able to listen to words being said, understand and respond to actions as they are contained in clarity. Clarity illuminating purpose, which is building effective sustainable community. The model supports creation, development, and sustainability of people leadership, programs, and organizations. Methods are transparent and replicable by people and organizations that address distress without being mired in distress that interferes with effectiveness and sustainability.

I worked together with Catherine Lamkin and Gwen Braxton and many others immediately after the 1983 conference to build a Black Women's Health Project presence in New York City. We secured space in a youth center on 117th Street in Harlem to begin hosting public monthly

meetings for Black women. Our early organizing efforts were held in various homes and other venues—I remember Fran Dory’s home in particular.

As I remember, Catherine and I knew each other from the New York City literary artistic communities. Gwen travelled from Chicago to New York City, eventually landing on Fort Green Place in Brooklyn. I think we met when I attended one of the salons—in her collective living space—filled with writers, dancers, musicians, poets. I also could have met either or both at rallies—United States out of Vieques, Reproductive Rights, Peace & Justice, or perhaps a NAPS performance, or a Sweet Honey In the Rock concert. All possibilities leading us to join together in building a New York Black Women’s Health Project presence.

We were focused on organizing. What was shared with us by Lillie P. Allen was that, importantly, we needed to form our support groups. Many participants in that first Black Women’s Health Conference were in public health work, social work, teaching, social justice work. What became clear was that toxic levels of stress and distress existed, affecting Black Women Health professionals and other doing social service support work. The Empowerment Model, referred to then as “The Process,” was a core part of developing the Black Women’s Health Project into an effective Organization.

How it was laid out in the organizational structure picture, “the process” was the heart—the heart nourishes and refreshes. Continuous clarification and unification of the *body*—body as individual person, person within a family; body as community structures—social services, municipal services. Personal peer-led support group, the place for each participant to practice receiving and giving support for coexistence and communication from their whole and essential self.

Subsequent to the conference we attended Black and Female: What Is the Reality?® weekend Workshops in Dahlonega, Georgia. We helped facilitate the first workshops in New York/New Jersey area. Combustible synergy produced amazing levels of release as pain from adult and childhood sexual violence was given air, light, and witness within the magnificent simplicity of Lillie’s question “How are you doing?” accompanied by her clear uninterrupted listening. Individual impact of race, poverty, color, class, education, isolation—implosions eroding health from spoken and unspoken codes of silence—spilling out in weeping, laughter, moans, and whispers until song sounds and hugs embraced participants as we let go, began transforming silence, separation, and distress.

We thought, talked, visioned in sameness and difference—love and caring always present, whether walking together or struggling apart.

My first meeting of Lillie and encounter with “the process” she embodied was an interesting and watchful experience. I remember things about the room: ceiling height, wood paneling,

large space. My spirit hovered as my mind, my physical form, assessed the appropriate responses that would make it safe to stay in the room. I was a very articulate and "mute" person; able to navigate, communicate and function in the world, yet only rarely touching ground. My unfiltered feelings, emotions were rarely spoken, even on some occasions when I thought they had been.

The gift of circumstance allowed me an education that included excellent reading, writing skills, math skills, city-country-world historical overview, geography, art, and illustration knowledge and understanding. From nursery school through 12th grade, I attended schools somewhat able to accommodate me, allow my spirit to flourish in private as mind-body, material self, developed—nominally—as expected. In this room, when it was my turn to share, I gave my name and said I was from Saturn (space being the place for Sun Ra, and me).

Lillie in no way challenged, dismissed, belittled, or exalted my entry into the circle; there was acceptance. Acceptance of the spirit connection that led me into Black & Female: What Is the Realty? Workshop®. Lillie P. Allen saw my floating spirit and my in the room mind-body presence, accepted me where I was and taught a model to us wanting to help build a playground for practice. I knew the work being done was real, amazing, and transformative.

Deep in unknown internal ether was a belief that the harm done to me was beyond reach. I could work to help organize and build, protect and care for, make a way for others.

Whatever was going on in my unconscious that occasionally surfaced as "monkey mind" thoughts, my commitment to the "Process"—"Be Present Empowerment Model" was total and complete. The eventual titling of the "Process" as the Be Present Empowerment Model in itself an indication of its power and purity. It was designated in a way that it could embrace and be embraced by all people. This spoke to the integrity of Lillie as embodiment and initial conduit for the existence of the "Model" in the world.

My "total and complete" commitment to understanding, learning, teaching, breathing the model became totally and completely evident when a—*wrinkle disturbance*—occurred as this process was in the beginning stages of being breathed in. Meaning: being practiced, understood integrated into relationship—relationship with self, others, within family, and work interactions—jobs, schools, organizations—corporations, program development.

As new cultures and relationships outside of the distress of oppression were evolving—*wrinkle disturbance* distress—fear, uncertainty emerged within leadership showing itself in the manner that appeared to me as business-as-usual hierarchical leadership.

I have these words now; probably had them then or could have easily conjured them—in the moment of this wrinkle disturbance what mattered was truth, spirit, and matter; truth that

would support and allow the continuing of the model-work that Lillie was living-teaching-emerging.

Therefore, when an indication that The Black Women's Health Project was changing the "heart"—the "process" that Lillie was teaching—in ways that were clearly a dilution of the "process"—my belief in the "process" I was experiencing as facilitated with Lillie's leadership was clear and true. *Wrinkle Disturbance* moving in a wave through ones with self-knowledge outside of distress is no disturbance at all.

Largest issue for me was patience inside transition, allowing, facilitating change that acknowledges harm while not allowing or participating in destruction.

I sat on the Black Women's Health Project board during some of this transition period. My quest, to both understand *Wrinkle Disturbance* occurring, while continuing to learn and strengthen the Black & Female: What is the Reality? work as being brought forth by Lillie, and us black women engaging the model, which now included *Mothers and Sons, Daughters and Fathers* workshops. Integral to the smoothness and consistency of empowering movement was the Lillie Allen Institute, and SETS (Sister's Empowering Themselves – Wanda, Vanessa-Fabu, Diane) allowing us to continue hosting Black and Female workshops, and the beginnings of Sister's & Allies. All action prior to 1992 were foundational to the founding and incorporation of Be Present as an organization that Lillie would act as Executive Director before naming and claiming her title of Creatrix of Play.

Teaching, sharing, growing an inclusive community of practice is intention; creating an organization is a means for teaching, for growth and expansion. The peer-led support group and development support system was and is designed to facilitate relationships and sustainability without need or reliance on money—no fees, salaries, dues, etc. Peer-led support groups comprised of three or more people meet monthly in homes or other venue of choice. A once monthly meeting hosted by local volunteer core group members serves to assist those wanting to start a group or be supported in their practice. Participants are all part of an organization with paid staff, and a volunteer board which draws from local organizing core groups. Integrated multi-level support and practice of the model facilitates staff and board relationships, function, and development. Money is raised based on vision, and while required for staff leadership and organizational development work within the Be Present Network, and in the community with social justice groups and organizations, individual support group have economic independence.

Early on I realized and saw that the model complemented and enhanced other work and practices—my holistic healing work and practice, my radio production work, my writing; it intersected nicely with my evolving peace-joy spiritual practice, and evolving understanding of

Buddha-Dharma; it contributed to how I spoke and acted within my familial relationships. As Be Present core numbers increase, synergy capacity production increase exponentially within the organization and into orbit—a star being born—sparkling brilliant delight.

Carletta Joy Walker is currently in a Be Present peer-led support group; part of the Be Present NY/NJ Regional Organizing Group; a trainer in the Be Present Empowerment Model; a member of the Board and serves on several committees, including Communications Co-Chair, IT, and Board Development.