

An abstract painting featuring a crowd of figures in various poses and colors, including red, blue, and pink, set against a background of green and yellow. The style is expressive and gestural, with thick brushstrokes and a sense of movement.

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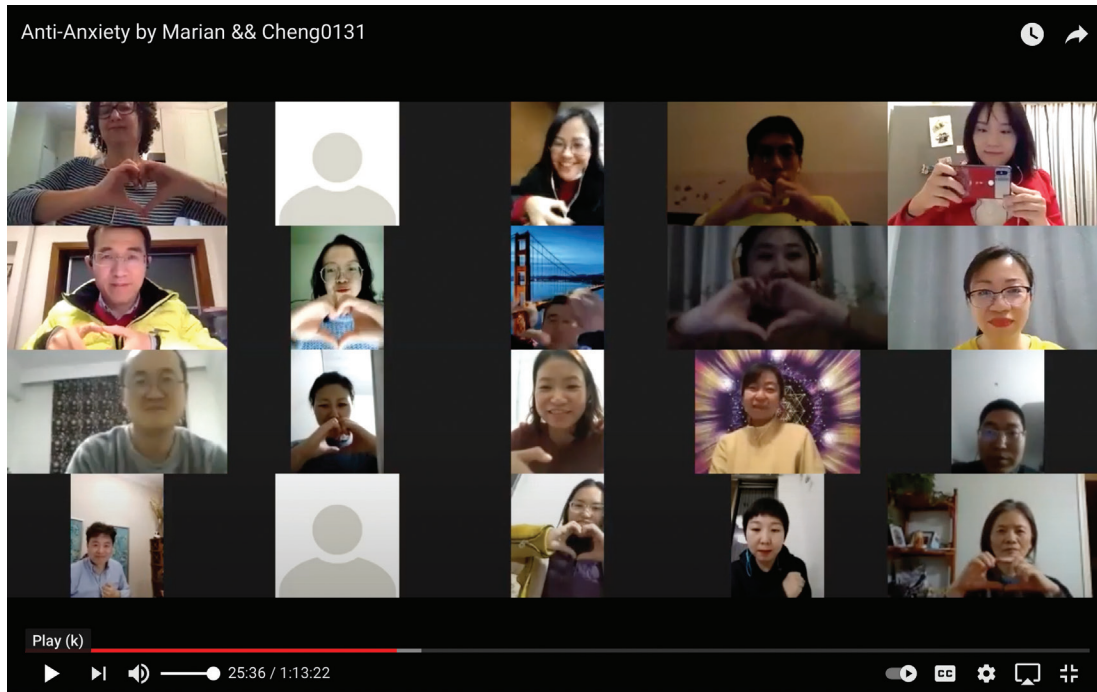
A Year of Creating a Heart in a Havenless World

Marian Rich

In a talk I attended in 1990 by my mentor, the late Fred Newman—public philosopher, political leader, social therapist and playwright—Newman was playing with the name and premise of a scholarly article he had recently read called, “The Family as a Haven in a Heartless World,” by sociologist Christopher Lasch. In his talk, Newman said:

There is no haven, no place to hide. There is no escaping the cruelty, the pain, the torture. Many people try. They turn to families, to intellectual endeavor, to relationships, to drugs, to crime, people look to politics, people look everywhere to find a haven. But there is, in my opinion, no haven. I want to talk about community not as a haven, not as a place where we can go and hide, but as an active principle, as a human, passionate, living environment which has the capacity to nourish those of us who are committed to engaging the cruelty of a havenless world.





January 31, 2020

Cheng Zeng, an applied improvisational coach, teacher and improviser based in Beijing, invited me to lead an hour-long play session on Zoom he called, "Anti-Anxiety with Marian." He was doing this because people were in lockdown due to something called a "coronavirus" that was spreading around China. I felt nervous early that morning, as it would be a new activity for me to play with a group of 25 people from around China. I reached out to Elena Boukouvala, a dear friend, fellow performance activist and drama therapist in Greece, and asked her for emotional support. She suggested that I begin with having everyone share their name,

location, how they were feeling, make a gesture expressing their emotions, and then have the whole group reflect back the words and gestures.

Cheng introduced me: "Marian is very rich in spirit and improv knowledge." I began: "Thank you, Cheng. Creating connections with all of you is how we will make this a better world. I'm part of an international movement we call performance activism. The power of play is something I'm very interested in. So, let's play! Share your name, make a gesture and a sound—or a word in English or Mandarin—to express how you feel. Then everybody will make the gesture and sound. I'll start! I'm Marian and I feel incredibly happy to be with you (hands on my heart)." I began to call on participants to share:

"I'm nervous from staying home and not happy being alone, trying to find a way to connect with you."

"I'm in Beijing, it's boring at home, I can't go out but now connected to friends from all over China... and New York!"

"I'm peaceful with my family, I'm curious about what will happen tonight!"

"I'm excited about tonight but since the virus a lot of concern for the people. I hope the situation gets better. I am hoping something good happens."

"I'm feeling very sad, but I make some improv games with my family, so I feel more confident."

"I feel constrained at home and I have butterflies in my stomach, and I feel love from all of you."

"I feel relaxed and also feel touched and worried."

"I'm from Chengdu where the pandas live, and now I feel really relaxed."



March 14, 2020

My father had recently turned 94, when his nursing home, The Actors Home (run by the Actors Fund of Actors Equity union), went into lockdown due to COVID19. Thankfully we were able to celebrate his birthday together at the Home a month earlier. In 2015, after my mother died, we moved my father, who had dementia, from the Hollywood Hills in Los Angeles to be closer to me in New

York. We had secured a spot at this wonderful facility. My father, a character actor, used to say to us: "If, god forbid, your mother dies before me, don't worry... just put me in the Actors Home!" My brother, my only sibling, was estranged from my father. So, since I couldn't share much or anything about my visits to my father with my brother, I began sharing photos and posts about my visits on Facebook with the hashtag #joyofdementia, named after work that my colleagues at the East Side Institute, a center for the study of social therapeutics and performance activism, were doing to transform the tragedy narrative of dementia. My father was always playful, but with dementia he became so much more so.

March 22, 2020

As a faculty member of the East Side Institute, I ran the first free play session sponsored by the Institute. We had 60 people together on Zoom from Europe, Latin America and the USA. This was the first of five sessions, I hosted the other four sessions which were co-led by

an international team of performance activists (from USA, Costa Rica, Italy, Japan, New Zealand and Mexico), all of whom were trained by the East Side Institute and selected by me. We had 460 people attend the sessions from 29 countries—many came to more than one session; we had over 100 people playing across borders in some of the sessions.

I greeted everyone by sharing that I have participated as a client in a social therapy group that meets on Zoom every week (before the pandemic) and that had taught me how intimate we can be online, sharing our emotionality, creating and developing our lives together. I said that I chair the International Organizing Committee for the Performing the World Conference and that I had been holding Zoom meetings for various groupings of 40 performance activists around the world who were members of the Committee. I also said that an informal grouping of activists, therapists, clowns, improvisers and coaches from around the world had begun meeting to create a new initiative in response to the pandemic.

That morning I watched a video of a 2001 talk that Fred Newman gave after 9/11 called, “Will We Ever Be Normal Again?” He spoke of chaos as an opportunity for development and described the possibilities it opened up and the value of not knowing. We don’t know what will happen—we have to play and perform.

March 22, 2020

Is it possible to make eye contact on Zoom? I made up an exercise for the play session. I demonstrated it, playing with looking at everyone in gallery view (all 50+ of us) and sometimes looking in the camera so it appears to others that we are looking more directly at each other. I played John Coltrane’s “Naima.” Afterwards, we all did the exercise for 2 minutes or so. Then I asked people what that was like. Two responses:

"I started crying and I was surprised at this experience and how the music helped to create this time we are together, so wonderful to see you and to imagine being seen."

"We can't touch each other physically, we have to social distance, but we can be there and not be there together."

April 5, 2020

The 20th Performing the World Conference was scheduled for October, 2020 in New York City. We received 180 proposals from 40 countries. We surveyed our Organizing Committee to find out what a virtual Performing the World (PTW) conference might look like.

"Online workshops can be held to support creative reframing activities, e.g., people are singing and playing saxophone on their balcony, people are performing hand-washing dances, etc., and do them collectively across borders."

"Improvise about meanings of the pandemic and problems we are facing, deconstructing them in the process."

"Video or voice responses to particular prompts/topics (What is home for you? How can we create a world of belonging?)."

"With our community of 300 youths in Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria as a pool of resources, we can start organizing a local PTW event in Nigeria."

"Share some thoughts on the politics of 19-coronavirus; Taiwan could host a small virtual PTW with several online performance and workshops that will be held internationally."

“Create a learning community/network of Performance Activism in Mexico and elsewhere.”

“Create a brigade of international support for the difficult times we are living.”

April 23, 2020

I was granted an outdoor visit with my father. My husband Ed and I were asked to put on full PPE, gowns, paper shower caps, and the best N95 face masks available. My father could no longer walk and was in a wheelchair. They wheeled him out to where we were waiting outside under a tent—it was a hot day—he was much further from us than six feet.

“Move me closer to my daughter!!”

“We can’t come closer to you, Daddy!” He was hard of hearing, so I was also shouting a bit.

“Why not???!!!” he responded with annoyance.

We liked to make funny faces together and to mirror each other. But we had on masks. I couldn’t figure out how to play, to improvise, to “accept the offers” we had to build with. I felt stuck. I softly began to cry. Ed whispered in my ear, “It’s okay...” But it wasn’t okay. In my mind I kept thinking, “This is SO FUCKED UP!!!”

All of a sudden I heard myself screaming, “I can’t come closer... there is a virus!!!”

It was hot and my father seemed very tired. The next thing I knew he was asleep in his wheelchair. I was too upset to be there. We left after 10 minutes. We went into town and picked up Chinese food for my father’s lunch, dropped it off and drove home. I must have cried for half the trip.

April to May, 2020

Cheng invited me to teach a 6-week class about social therapeutics for 12 coaches, educators, improvisers and human resource professionals in China with him on Zoom. We played a lot with emotionality, philosophy and performance. I made notes of their responses after each class:

“I felt listened to, important and respected.”

“It was powerful, we can feel our emotions. I was being seen.”

“I am having self-awareness of the emotion and how to use the emotion to develop leadership.”

June 27, 2020

We launched the Global Play Brigade early in June. We were asked to run a training for a grouping of healthcare providers, yoga teachers and art therapists in Mexico who wanted to bring play into their work during the pandemic.

I teamed up with social therapist and performance activist Miguel Cortes from Juarez, Mexico. Miguel co-designed and co-led the final East Side Institute play session in April for over 100 people from around the world.

After a presentation in English and Spanish about social therapeutics, we came up with the idea of having the 15 participants break into small groups and design a short play activity to help me. I shared some things about me to give the participants some offers to create with: I had recently had a difficult visit with my father who has dementia, I want to learn to speak Spanish, I wear my heart on my sleeve and can never hide my emotions, which are plentiful and



often feel almost too much, I love working with young people, and I also used to love visiting with the other residents at the Actors Home when I would visit my father.

They came back with the most delightful performances—Hack the Mask where everyone played with face masks; How to be Mexican where everyone wore a costume, played an instrument or drank a Mexican drink; they recited a collective poem to me; and they sang to me.

I cried. I felt “healed.” We talked about the experience. They went on to run free play sessions for nurses working on the frontlines with COVID patients.

August, 2020

My father's infected toe got worse and worse. His doctor said it was gangrene. He was in enormous pain. I agreed to start morphine. I was granted end-of-life visits. Ed came with me. At first my father was semi-conscious. I'd whisper in his ear, "Don't worry about me, it's okay to go, Ed will take good care of me."

He opened his eyes and looked at Ed and with a huge, loving smile said: "Eddie!!!" and immediately fell back into his morphine haze.

The next time he woke up, he glanced at Ed and then looked at me and said, "Who's *that* guy!?"

Even as he was close to death he managed to make me laugh with a classic comedy routine. Did he know that?

August 21, 2020

Ed and I were dining outdoors. I was sad. My father was close to his transition. My phone rang. The hospice nurse said that if I wanted to have a final visit, to come today. He would most likely pass in 24 hours.

We arrived at the Actors Home and after putting on our PPE we made our way to his room. He was curled into a fetal position. We were together in silence.



Death takes work. Dying takes patience. Death comes slowly but surely.

August 22, 2020

I got the phone call in the late afternoon while I was walking along the East River to meet a dear friend. "Your father transitioned." I had attended the morning session of our virtual Performing the World Happenings. It was about the relationship between theatre and repressive environments. I began thinking of my father. I put a small photograph of him and me on my laptop so he could be part of the discussion. I had to miss the evening session about Clown Vets, the documentary that was made about Patch Adams taking war veterans on a clown trip to Guatemala.

I can't remember when—in August or September, 2020

I got a phone call from my friend Patch Adams. I had sent him a letter to tell him my father had passed. He recited this poem to me:

If I die, survive me with such sheer force
that you waken the furies of the pallid and the cold,
from south to south lift your indelible eyes,
from sun to sun dream through your singing mouth.
I don't want your laughter or your steps to waver,
I don't want my heritage of joy to die.



Don't call up my person. I am absent.
Live in my absence as if in a house.
Absence is a house so vast
that inside you will pass through its walls
and hang pictures on the air
Absence is a house so transparent
that I, lifeless, will see you, living,
and if you suffer, my love, I will die again.

–Pablo Neruda, *Sonnet XCIV*

September 5, 2020

I held an Allan Appreciation Shiva, the Jewish ritual of mourning, for my father on Zoom. I showed a video of some of the hundreds of photos I had taken during the 5 years of caring for my father while he lived at the Actors Home, including still photos of FaceTime and Zoom calls the Actors Home managed to do with family members and residents during lockdown. The chat was very lively. The love came pouring in from my friends in New York and around the country, from family, colleagues from the Global Play Brigade, the Applied Improv Network, and the performance activism community in Nigeria, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Austria, Mexico, Costa Rica, Israel and China.

Playing with my last name, someone wrote: “Rich and Rich Enrich!” and Cheng Zeng who joined us from Beijing, responded: “Rich & Rich! Rich spirits, rich life experiences, rich emotion, rich love, rich happy, rich relationship. You represent the great quality of human, Marian.”

December 10, 2020

I joined the *Alchemy of Archetypes* workshop led by British theatre-maker/clown/performer Peta Lily on Zoom. I kept feeling my father's presence, especially because Peta's selection of Shakespeare's text had me reciting words that resonated so much for me. The Bard wrote my father's favorite words to recite. Right after my mother died, I remember he came into the bedroom where I was sleeping and climbed into bed with me early in the morning. He laid there so deeply sad, somehow processing his grief with his dementia. And yet he began to recite from memory:

Give me the crown. Here, cousin, seize the crown;
Here cousin: On this side my hand, and on that side yours.
Now is this golden crown like a deep well
That owes two buckets, filling one another,
The emptier ever dancing in the air,
The other down, unseen and full of water:
That bucket down and full of tears am I,
Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high.

–Shakespeare, *King Richard II*

December 13, 2020

On the morning of the last session of *The Alchemy of Archetypes* class I laid back in my bathtub and the room began to spin. For the next two months, I was spinning, dizzy, and unable to do much more than sit still, rest and watch relaxing shows on TV—stand-up comedy, na-

ture documentaries and anything else I could find that calmed me. After almost a year of being in our world as we were experiencing the COVID19 pandemic, political upheavals including the brutal murder by police of George Floyd, a Black man, the protests against police brutality, the police attacking demonstrators that led to an imposed curfew in June in New York City, the dysfunctional electoral process and hyper-partisanship in the USA, the untold suffering and death from the incompetence of world leaders in handling the pandemic, the increasingly widening chasm between the wealthy and the poor—I began to wonder, was the whole world experiencing vertigo?

December 13, 2020

In our final class we explored the archetypes of the Clown/Fool/Jester, the Old Woman/ Crone, and Death (“I am the inevitable.”) Death was the doorkeeper. Death was a skeleton doing stand-up comedy.

January 16, 2021

I went to my vestibular therapist and in the bathroom there was a picture of a skeleton at a microphone. I emailed the photo to Peta.

I wrote, “I hope your new year is going better than mine! Believe it or not I’ve had vertigo since our last archetype class. As some have said to me, seems the whole world has vertigo. I started seeing a vestibular therapist. And today I saw this photo in the rest room. I had to laugh...took this photo to send to you... Death doing stand-up comedy!”

I received this poem in return from Peta:

The Clown

Roll the drums and raise the curtain
chaos is glory and uncertainty, certain.
The facts are all useless,
speak nonsense instead—
because down is up when you stand on your head.
How delightful it is to be defective—
a kick in the pants brings a fresh perspective:
serious is stupid, dignity overrated—
the fairground mirrors are all silver-plated.
Deliberately misread the riot act—
know that smart is never as clever as the cracked.
Step up, step inside,
make failure your friend—
bake a cake with sawdust
make despair wag its rear end.

Let identity slip
balloon, string, fingertip
transform:
artichoke, angel, bookcase, fish.
Let loose your grip, tumble,
stub your toe, trip
and blow your nose with a victory trumpet.
Dance badly, cry buckets.
let us see you survive,
then hang out your unholy laundry to dry—

for chaos is glory
and clumsiness divine
and the buddah
is always known by his smile

–Peta Lily, 2015 (revised 2019)

February 24, 2021

The dizziness finally subsided a couple of weeks ago. I slowly begin to get back to the things I love—teaching, co-facilitating workshops, and creative work. I made a new friend in the *Alchemy of Archetypes* class. He sent me an email today asking if I had an article to submit to the journal he edits. So, I wrote this for Stephen and for all of you.

The world keeps spinnin'
With me upon it.
The world keeps sinnin'
And I can't stand it.

–Fred Newman, lyrics to song *I Don't Get It*, from the musical *Coming of Age in Korea* (1996)

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Marian Rich is a comic educator, performance activist and play revolutionary. She has spent over 30 years leading playful workshops and programs in which people come together to grow and develop. As faculty at the East Side Institute, she trains activists, educators and scholars around the world who want to infuse their work with the power of play and performance. Marian is a founder of the Global Play Brigade.

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COVER ART: *Dance*, by Shaun McNiff, circa 2004, 19" x 24", tempera on paper.