

Meta Commerce is a force; a meteor created by the powerful explosion that was the Black arts movement in Chicago during the 1960s. Her official bio reads: founder of Story Medicine, certified wellness practitioner, author, seasoned teacher, and healer focused deeply on issues of oppression since the early 1990s. She has worked with groups and individuals using story medicine in numerous formats. She's a proud graduate of Goddard College in Vermont where she earned her MFA in fiction writing.

I had the honor of sitting with Meta earlier this summer to discuss her extraordinary path to Asheville and the foundations of Story Medicine.

Story Medicine is the sort of program my Midwestern cousins would call “very Asheville”, It is not based on the confines of standard Western medicine, and requires an unusual level of honesty from participants. The sessions are designed to help foster intimate self-expression and are guided by these seven learning tools; an Indigenous frame of reference, the power of words, the value and sacredness of story, memory as raw material and community resource, heart-centered language for what has happened to us, creating community as we study, dialogue, learn and heal together, new-self-care skills necessary for working with this subject.

You say you were raised in the black arts movement in Chicago, can you describe what that was like? Well my mother was a writer and at the forefront of that movement, so I watched her work. The black arts movement sort of exploded out of the civil rights movement. The writers were very serious, they sacrificed a lot to write, do the institution building, and organizing that they did. It was a very exciting time, a very productive time, and I also saw artists and activists that put no seam between their art and their activism, It was a tradition that they kept and they passed on. I inherited that tradition, I don't know how to separate the work I do in the community from my own healing work.

I didn't realize your mother was a writer. What did she write? She wrote poetry and taught black studies at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle campus. My father was a jazz musician, and my great grandmother wrote sacred poetry. My maternal grandmother wrote gospel music. Chicago itself is a creative hub. With all of that, I had no choice but to write. I also wrote, as Michele Wallace said, “as a means of communication,” because I had been silenced as a child.

What do you mean you were silenced? Violence was commonplace, and if you were abused, you were also taught to keep silent. When you can't articulate what you feel, your voice is diminished. And that was my experience.

So writing helped you find your voice? Absolutely. Not right away but if something came up for me I would grab a paper and pen. I would write a song or a poem, fold it, put it in an envelope and stash it at the back of a drawer or something because I thought it was only for me.

Wow, did you keep those early writings and have you read them recently? No, they all got lost in the shuffle.

Why did you leave Chicago? I left in 1980 seeking a better place to raise my children. The blizzards of '77 and '78 also helped me make up my mind. I moved to Atlanta and lived there for 25 years. I raised my children and did my duty as a mother, homemaker, and wife. And when all that was done I realized that I could make a decision about what *I* wanted. I decided I wanted a teaching career. I was a substitute teacher for four years in Atlanta but couldn't seem to get beyond that, so I moved back to Chicago, got a teaching job, got my foot in the door and became a professor at Chicago City Colleges. But I began at an African-centered high school on the South Side. Teaching there was the hardest thing I have ever done.

Why was that job so difficult? Because of the anger of the children, those children were full of rage and ready to fight at the drop of a hat. I was prepared in terms of subject matter, I was from there and I could relate. I thought I could simply go back and give back, but it was all I could do to get through that year because of how violent those children were. The anger of those children forced me to face my own anger.

You were also a massage therapist, were you doing bodywork at this time? I started as a bodyworker in Atlanta in the late 80s looking to build a practice, which I did. Clients came to me by referral, people in chronic pain, at that time I had heat in my hands, so I was able to find the seat of their pain and unravel it. I treated people who had been in pain for 10 years straight, and it would take one or two sessions with me and it would be gone. Once the physical pain was gone they would spontaneously begin to speak about the trauma in their lives, and I didn't anticipate that or know how to respond, so I just learned to listen. What I know now in hindsight is that the story often sits underneath the pain and when we release the pain the story wants to be expressed.

I changed the direction of my work once I got in sync with the listening and made a space for it. I started to allow two hour blocks on my schedule, one hour for hands on work and then an hour for them to speak. I knew that what attention, relief and healing those folks got in those two hours for that fee was cutting edge work.

Once I knew that I wanted to follow the stories, I realized that I also had a story to tell. I made a commitment to heal my own life. I didn't have any blanks in my memory, but stories are contextual. So I started studying the lives of both my parents. I thought I knew them, but I really didn't. Once I sat with where they were born, who raised them, what their losses and wounds were, and how they brought all that into living, I was ready. When I had that on both sides I could go back and look more closely at my own story because I had the context into which I had been born. And once that was clear, all of my education shifted. I wanted to understand what had happened to my people, to get to the root of some of the behavior in my community. Why was everyone so angry, why was my father so f-ing angry...and why was my mother so relentless. Even today she is still relentless, at the age of 82. My father died at age 62 absolutely imploding with anger...absolutely. Refusing to get old and die an old man.

Was that when you started Story Medicine? What really motivated me to develop my own program was a six-month program I went through myself. I was married to a military officer at that time who was being transferred between St. Louis and Atlanta. In St. Louis I started looking around for programs for survivors of abuse, and sure enough Washington University had just started a six-month group for women survivors. I went and I was the only woman of color there. We were all professional women around the same age, and it was the first time I told my story. Once I did it was like an explosion of emotion, I was like a volcano, I couldn't stop. In fact it was so bad that I asked my husband to take me to the hospital... and he refused because he was afraid that if anyone from the office found out why I was there it could have a negative impact on his career.

Wow, was that when you asked for a divorce? That, my healing, was the beginning of the end...

Was that program focused on writing? No it was just about finding your voice. We would have topics, or exercises at the beginning of sessions, but mostly we shared our stories. For six months I listened to these women and learned in time that I was not alone...this was a movement; we were all

breaking the silence. At the end of the program I had spoken, I didn't go into a lot of detail but at least I had a place to speak. And I knew working in the mind/body field that the program could have been improved by adding some holistic material and making sure the women understood that they had a role to play in their healing process.

I started looking for other programs that were holistic, but then my husband got transferred back to Atlanta. I fell into a stupor with that move. But then I got busy and created a workbook and launched a new program. It was the first of its kind, and people wanted to get behind it. I did that for 10 years, heard a whole slew of stories... all the things these women had endured...

So you had this successful program...what made you leave? Why did you move to Asheville? I visited Asheville in 1997 to do some work, and just remembered there was a charm to the place, there was something about Asheville that I never forgot.

How would you describe the health of the creative community in Asheville? I moved here in December 2009 in a snow storm, and I am still here because of the magic. The magic more than the natural beauty. The magic is in the way the majority of people here are searching for themselves and they are searching in a way that is honest. They will tell you that they came here to heal or to start over or to do things differently. They came in response to the magnet just like I did. Wanting a community of like-minded souls, I have never lived anywhere with the sense of community that I find here, people sincerely wanting to do their work and to be transformed.

It is inspiring to work with white folks who are willing to explore their privilege, their whiteness, and want to deal with that. It gives me something that I can't even name yet, the only word that comes to mind is... relief.

Have you found a lot of white people here willing to do that work? Absolutely that is why Story Medicine here in the spring of 2011. The same year I finished my MFA. I was still working on *The Mending Time*, and I'd met a lot of people through a church I was attending and when I would mention Story Medicine it was like their antennas went up. I was still teaching in Haywood County — I taught there for four years... a very painful experience.

What was painful about that experience? Well students called themselves Hillbillies and they were proud to be Hillbillies. Proud to wave the Rebel flag. Many of them had never had an African-American teacher. I was the

only African-American woman teacher on that campus so it was very isolating and I could see the need for what I was hired to do. The school itself had no mandate for change. They knew there was a tradition of bigotry out there and the school was content to leave it just as it was.

It seems like this is where we are as a country. There are pockets of people who sincerely want to recognize white privilege and are working towards progress surrounded by seas of people who don't recognize white privilege and have no desire to change. I am wondering if you have ideas about how this might change? I have very strong feelings about that. I myself am committed to teaching the true history, but I hadn't counted on having to personally look racism in the face for four years. It was costly for me in terms of my health... and hell what I paid for gas going to and from that school. It was a low paying job...and as I said many of the students had never had an African-American teacher. Some had, and some students did learn...I had some beautiful successes out there, but I also met with some self-avowed white supremacist students who did challenge me. I had students get up and walk out of my class when I showed them my model of oppression in America. They got up and said, "This is not the America I know," and left. Once I gave a group assignment to read MLK Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and do a group presentation on it. One group collectively decided that they were not going to read the letter...so when it came time for their presentation they stood up and announced their decision. I mean I was in an institution of higher learning, working with students refusing to learn...

Wow, that is ridiculous. Yes it is, those are some of the experiences I will never forget. When four years had passed I noticed changes in my health and immunity so I just stopped. You know it was not worth it... by that time the program had grown...and I was old enough to retire, so I did.

What inspires you to keep working, what gives you hope? I got solid encouragement early on. In my teens Gwendolyn Brooks asked to publish a poem I had written in one of my lowest moments. I was 17 years old, and I said no because I was still silenced. I didn't feel worthy for anyone to publish anything I had written. It took time for me to translate the hope I felt deep inside into what I could do for myself. James Baldwin said, "There is always hope, you cannot tell the children that there is no hope." I was a child with hope when it made no sense to have hope. I never gave up I guess I get that from my mom.

I love James Baldwin. I had a chance to meet him that I passed up. He had come to town (Chicago) one night and my aunt, who had a drama group, called the house and said, “You all better get over here, because Jimmy Baldwin is coming and we are probably going to be up talking with him all night!. Just get over here as fast as you can.” My mother decided right away to go and my brother went along, she asked me if I wanted to go and I said no. Usually she did not give me a choice, usually she just grabbed me and drug me along...since she was giving me the choice, I said no, and found out they had stayed up talking with James Baldwin all night long.

So you didn't really have an idea of who he was yet? No, not really, my mother had us read *The Fire Next Time*...but you know when you read somebody's book, that is one thing, but when you sit with them and that is a totally different thing.

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I couldn't agree more. I am glad I did not pass up my chance to sit with Meta Commerse. Her work and her presence are inspiring. I don't know about you, but I need all the hope and evidence of goodness that I can get right now.

To learn more about Story Medicine:
<http://www.storymedicineasheville.com>