



Transcript of Radio Production (March 1985) at WXPB Featuring an Interview with Dr. Rachel Davis Dubois founder of the Art of Group Conversation

Rachel Davis was born in 1892 into a South Jersey, Quaker Farm family. The author of six books including her recently published autobiography, *All This and Something More*, she is best known for her work with Group Conversation, a process which took her into post-war Germany in 1951, and because of which Martin Luther King Jr. asked her to aid him in the Civil Rights struggle.

Named the "Mother of Intercultural Education" by Margaret Mead, Rachel has lived her life and dedicated her career around the dream of bringing peace and mutual appreciation to all people. Earlier this week, she received awards from the state of New Jersey in Gloucester County in honor of International Women's Week.

I interviewed Rachel on a gray day near her home at Dawn's Edge in Woodstown, New Jersey. This is Russanne Bucci.

Russanne: Rachel, I'd like to ask you, what first sparked your interest in people from other cultures?

Rachel: Well going way back to my growing up days, I suppose it's because at that time on the farm. This place was a part of the farm back in those days. We had people who had just come over from Italy, the Italian-Americans and we also had Blacks who came up from King and Queen County, Virginia working with us in our kitchen and on the farm. And it wasn't as interculturally mixed as it is today, but it was interculturally mixed. Later on when I was more conscious of the fact that these people did come from places that were different from my own. I would hear Guiseppe Masamesi, who was a teenage Italian worker, I mean, whose people had just come over from Italy, and he would be singing out in the, as he was cutting asparagus. He would be singing something that I had never heard, and we would talk about it later. But I can remember, especially, Bill Williams who was a Black American. Now this takes me back to my earliest life. I had just learned to write, and Bill Williams couldn't read or write. Knowing that I could write, he asked me if I would write a love letter to the girl he had left behind him in King and Queen County Virginia.

Russanne: When did you first become aware of racism or the idea that some people are not as good as others?

Rachel: I don't know when I first became aware of it. But I know that when I was teaching, not in my first job which was in Glassboro High School, but my second job which was in Woodbury High School in 1924. About that time, we had about 1500 young high school kids from different towns and around. And I knew that the Blacks, that they had had been segregated in the grades and I knew what that meant to them. And there was only about 30 or so of them in a little bunch, going around in the high school and I knew that the other kids were calling them niggers. And I also knew, by this time, that the children of the Italian Americans were being called dirty dagos, they were being called those. And I knew what that meant to the personalities of the children. So, we had assembly programs almost every day, whether they had anything that interested the young people, nobody seemed to care.

And so, the kids would be very restless in high school and we teachers were supposed to walk up and down the aisle and look very seriously at these kids. So they wouldn't be fussing with their papers, but I was walking up and down thinking about, *"how could we use these assemblies so that we could really get the young people to appreciate each other and also first be proud of themselves?"*

And so I thought if we only had some outside speakers for the Italian background kids. And then I thought too that we would need to do more than have some outside speakers. We need to have the youngsters to begin to mutually appreciate each other. And so in the end I said to myself, we will have, and I didn't know that anything would happen as a result of this; I was just dreaming ahead! And so, I said to myself, I think we ought to have at the end of the month we would have the students, the pupils themselves work together. And I can tell exactly the moment when my career started in doing something of an Interculturalist, this is intercultural. Oh! There was one day when, well, I should say that that the superintendent of the school system and also, he was also principal of the high school. And he used to encourage me to come in and talk with him because I had, I had been around places and, and he, anyway, he seemed to trust me as a teacher and I was then teaching social studies and history to the freshman.

And so, and he and...Mr. Thomas, the man who is the principal, he and I were standing alone there. And he said, *"Will you be in charge of all the assembly programs for the whole year?"* I was ready! I said, *"Yes, if you'll let me do what I want to do."*, and he said, *"do anything you want. I trust you."*

Russanne: What made your work in the Woodbury School controversial?

Rachel: A woman on the Board of Education, who, who didn't like what I was doing. She got the American Legion to say to the Board of Education that they ought to dismiss me because I was doing things that in working with the youngsters the way they were. The American Legion had gotten three

letters from Washington, all of them saying, “you've got a dangerous person in your community, get rid of her at once!” What we found out later was that one of them was from the DAR and another one, from the SAR, Sons of the American Revolution.

And the other was from, a woman who was the president of the women's, Penn Women's League, but she was married to the general who was starting our making of chemical warfare materials. Mr. Thomas said that, “*Three people, three men from the Board of Education are going to visit you in your home tomorrow night and they're going to ask you to resign in secret.*” and he says, “*I don't want you to resign and you don't have to resign.*” And he told me what to tell them. This is where I praise Mr. Thomas over, and over.

Anyway, so when they came, I asked the gentleman, so what do you think? I'm a bad teacher? “*Oh, no, no! We think you're one of our best teachers, but all this fuss about, this is better for you to get a job somewhere else and we will give you a very good recommendation!*” And then I said, well gentlemen, “*do you remember that this is America and that we have free speech and freedom of opinion?*” And I said, “*Gentlemen, I refuse to resign.*”

Russanne: Most of you work after that period of time, centered around a process called Group Conversation. How was Group Conversation born?

Rachel: Well, that's very interesting. I always say, I did not think of it, I did not invent it. It just happened one night in my apartment. And it happened when Hitler was beginning to be powerful over here, as well as in Germany. But before the war, they sent Nazis to this country, real men who came over and formed little bunds. Germans bunds in New York City and later I guess in different parts of our country.

And the man who was Christianizing, that happened to be a Catholic priest from, Father Coughlin, from Detroit. And it was just before TV, we had the radio and he yelled out every morning. “*This is a Christian white man's country!*” And you could tell then by that, who he didn't like. So the older people were picking it up and beginning to show their prejudice. And the teachers at about that time, I was teaching Intercultural Education. We really called it Intercultural Education, and I was asked to give a course in that at New York University. And when we came out of the university, we could see swastikas on the churches and synagogues. You would think this was Germany itself. And so, my teachers said, “*How can we affect the change of the attitudes of the parents? Because they are influencing the children in our class.*” And, then I said, “*I don't know how to change the attitudes of grown-ups who are prejudiced. If they're already prejudiced, and they are, then giving them facts alone is a waste of time. It just goes in one ear and out the other.*” And so, but I said, “*I only know that if we can use the arts, music and drama and so on, you get at the feelings of people on a positive level.*” And so I said, “*We're grown ups, let's experiment on ourselves.*” And I sometimes think that was one of the wisest things I ever said, “*let's experiment on ourselves.*”

And so I invited them to my apartment in the village, it was a rather large apartment at that time. And I said, *"bring other people,"* we had about 30 or so in the class and the teachers were quite intercultural. And so they, I said, *"Bring a few other people of different backgrounds and we'll see what will happen."* But I did two things before in preparation for it. I didn't know what we were going to do, I was following my intuition. And so, but ahead of time, I said to myself, I need some help, a real artist. And so I knew a young Jewish young woman, whom I still love and adore, Devora Lapsing. At that time, she was a concert dancer on the stage even, but she could take a small group of people and get them to move together in a way, which would make them feel as if they were one. You know?

Wallace House knew how to get anybody to sing their own folk song. He would do it this way. For instance, if you were Greek and of course, you won't spontaneously bring out a folk song at this moment, because nobody asked you about it. But he would say, *"Is this the way it goes?"* and he would do it a little bit wrong on purpose and they say, *"no, no, no! this is the way it goes!"*, and they'd sing it. And then everybody would sing it.

Well, my intuition. Oh, I knew that the Jewish people were celebrating their fall booth of bows. They told about it with such love, fun, and joy. And I thought this is very much like our Thanksgiving because they bring in the fruit and vegetables of the fall. And so my intuition said, let's have all of us tell how we felt in the autumn when our folks did interesting things in the fall. And we shared it back and forth. And all at once, the whole group felt as if it was one body. And a young man said, *"Oh, I think we found a new way of coming together!"* And that was it. And we joyously stopped and began to talk about it. And an elderly, man, who was a real social worker, not in my class, but he'd come. And he said, *"Well you did it tonight, but I don't think he'll ever be able to do it again."* And that challenged us, and from then on we began to do it over and over.

Russanne: Rachel, you became aware of women's rights at a very early age when you heard Alice Paul speak. Will you describe where you were when you first heard Alice Paul?

Rachel: Oh, that takes me way back to the farm. And there was a bachelor in Woodstown, a wealthy person, because he owned a lot of land and buildings and ran a department store. He had a pre-Chautauqua Idea, in which he decided that it would be good for these farmers if I would pay to have some lecturer come down on Sunday nights and maybe they'll come in and listen. And so one night, I don't know why we were brought in, I didn't, I don't remember my parents saying, there's going to be an interesting thing in town tonight. I somehow was just there with them and a young woman was up on the stage of the Opera House and her name was Alice Paul. And she was introduced as having just come back from England. Now, what happened, what she was at that time, of course I didn't know, but I was excited when I heard her tell about how she had just recently graduated from Swarthmore and had been reading in history how long it took a lot of countries to see to it that women

got to vote. But she was going to go to England because no, she had already come back from England, having gone over there to help the English women work on the vote. Mrs. Parkhurst was the leader, their leader and they were being sent to jail! And how terrible it was to be in jail and how we must work for women's vote.

So then I went home, but I didn't hear anything more about votes for women because there were too many things on the farm to do. Alice Paul, back in 1914 and all the way through until 1920, before we women in the United States got the vote. And that was because of the way Woodrow Wilson was our president, and not that he wanted to be that way. But anyway, he had grown up in the South and after, of course, after the Civil War, but the Southern attitude toward women is what he had. But his attitude toward women was always "*dear ladies*". If I can put my feelings into words. And so they, when the women of this country asked him about votes for women, he said, "*Dear ladies, of course I'm for votes for women, but not through the Democratic Party.*"

Russanne: Rachel, you really were a leader and a pioneer in your day, and you still are. Do you have any idea how being a woman made a difference in the work that you did?

Rachel: Well I didn't think of it as a woman at first, but as I went along I've of course known that women are working hard today and I often ask, are we working to get rights for ourselves? We have the vote but are we working only for equal pay and equal work? Or do we have something unique as women to contribute to the ongoing welfare of society? And I think that we have something unique! Some men, now you see some men all the way along the line are the kind of men who can cooperate with women because they too know what it means intellectually. You see? And those are the men whom we ought to encourage, and and be on an equal basis with. But not just equal, equal pay for equal work. It brings us to the fact that we have two hemispheres in our brain. And the hemisphere that the women have always paid attention to is the intuition, the feeling part of the right side of the brain and the other is the logic and reason which in the past we've said, this is the man side of the brain and and the right side is the women's side. We shouldn't use, we shouldn't use those terms anymore. We need a balance and therefore, the men who can balance with us, are the men we want to work with.

Russanne: Rachel you mentioned intuition. Now in your autobiography which was recently published entitled, *All This and Something More*, you talk about the times when you relied on your intuition; how did you ever get into that habit? What has your intuition meant to you in your life?

Rachel: Well, when I felt something, if I felt it strongly, I knew I had to do it. And I don't know what started me on that, just ever since I've been born I guess that's what I've done. That reminds me of my mother. One time we were busy, and I was in high school. It was Saturday morning, the two of us were busy bunching asparagus. And we were there alone. And she said, "*Rachel, does thee know why thee is*

different from my other children?" And she said it with amusement, you know? And I said, "No why?" And she said, "Well, when thee was born in the bedroom up in the farm near Clarksboro, New Jersey. The nurse said, "I'm going to take this baby up into the attic before I take it down stairs so she'll be high-minded." So we both laughed and that's no reason, of course, that's just one of these superstitions. So it's just, when I feel that I ought to do something, I do it. And as I look back, it's never led me in the wrong direction, except maybe two or three times. And that's when I wish I hadn't. You know, we always make mistakes, of course.

But for instance, you have to have enough nerve to do it too, to follow your intuition. And one time for instance, when I had been sent in 1920, I was still teaching you see and the war had come. And the Quakers in Philadelphia were so shocked at the fact that the war had come and we hadn't had any war except the Spanish-American war. And so they thought war was over. They organized in 19, the summer of 1920. They organized the first International Conference of Quakers, of Friends. And they sent several young people, and I was one of several young people. I had to learn, I had to hear after I went over there, I heard an older Quaker report to this group of Quakers from 16 countries, a terrible race riot had happened in Chicago in 1919 the year before. And I was so shocked that I had not heard about it when I was a History and social studies teacher in Glassboro. How hadn't I known about it? And that so shocked me that I decided that I better stop teaching for a little while. That's what my intuition told me. And so well, what that did for me! It just changed my life! Because what I did was to say to any committee or organization around Philadelphia, I said "I'm a teacher for four years. I don't want to teach, I want to learn what's going on in the world! So I can be a better teacher. I want to work in your organization." And somehow, my intuition said, you can't learn it by just reading something in a book.

That time in 1920, there were no schools for the Blacks in the South, hardly any education for them except for what the Northern churches sent down. And the Quakers had a little school of 500 Blacks and 50 White teachers, all from the North. Because if you're going to teach ex-slaves, it can't, you can't be a White person from the South in 1920. And so they sent me down South to look over this school and come back and make a report. And see what they wanted, because they were helping to get more money to send down. And so, that's what I did. And what a shock, I had a culture shock when I went South. And at first, when I was at the school, it was very interesting. They wanted me to talk to the assembly and I said, "what shall I talk about?" And they said, "Oh anything!" And I said, "Well, I've been abroad and we're against war," and they said, "Okay, talk about it!" So I talked about peace and no more war, and all at once, 500 voices of young people started singing, "WE AIN'T GONNA STUDY WAR NO MORE! WE'RE GOING TO LAY DOWN OUR SWORD AND SHIELD, DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE, THE RIVERSIDE!" Tears just streamed down my face, I had never heard that particular song before.

Russanne: Rachel, one last question. What sort of advice could you give to women today who are working in the field of creating peace and furthering understanding among peoples?

Rachel: I think we just have to know that we don't know the real answer, but that we need to be with each other and realize that we can find the people who are working along the same line as we are. And hold, well like, know that even if we're silent, I sometimes think that there is power, spiritual and physical and mental power in, in the silence. And in this silence, I'm sure that we will find the answers.