

Dancing with Chaos:
Lessons in Life, Art, & Leadership
By Ashley Crofoot

In a semester-long afterschool expressive arts program at an inner city middle school, five teenagers sit in an uneven circle on the floor, with paper and oil pastels before them. This afternoon they noisily pushed, pulled, and galloped into our makeshift classroom, the concrete-walled and windowless overflow room off the side of the school cafeteria, calling out, “Hey Miss Ashley, can we *move* right away today!?” So, for the past fifteen minutes the students have been taking turns calling out and physically exploring various imaginary scenarios – “You’re a turtle stuck on its back!...You just won an Olympic gold medal!” Breathless and quieter now, they have each been asked to draw in response to the question, “Where am I ‘at’ today?”

For our drawing activity, in which I also take part today as model-participant, my fifteen-year-old seventh grade student Jay has chosen to sit next to me, as he often does. Jay, a physically tiny boy, has been consistently disruptive yet eager to be included in the group, in spite of frequent emotional and physical outbursts, vocalized unwillingness to follow through with the directions of many of the group’s processes, and an obvious difficulty “fitting in” with his peers. Today he begins his drawing as though attacking the page, scribbling furiously with his oil pastels in black, orange, red. Chunks of color fly as he crumbles the pastels with the force of his motions. Repeatedly, he blows the oily bits so that they scatter onto my drawing, each time glancing at me from the corner of his eye. I feel a twinge of annoyance and anxiety within; is this kid getting out of control *again*? How can I “keep him in line” for the sake of the group? I feel the pressure of indecision build until, in a moment without thought, I abandon the pinks and greens that I’ve been drawing with, and begin to work the fragments of his pastels into my own piece. Each time a spray of orange or black or red lands on my paper, I bring it into my own drawing. I enjoy the sensation of rubbing and smearing the pastels onto the page until their forms are completely absorbed and integrated into the paper, and the image that emerges is abstract, yet surprisingly pleasing to me in color, shape, and texture.

In the process of this drawing, I have encountered my own frustration with another person’s behavior, and discovered a lesson that I can apply to other relationships in my life: in appropriate contexts, I can allow others’ “stuff” to be a creative resource. I can embrace the messiness of relationship, and enter into a collaborative paradigm of community in which surprise, variation, and improvisation are welcome. In turn, my student has the opportunity to experience himself as accepted and acknowledged not in spite of, but inclusive of, his frustrated desire for attentive contact. I can’t be sure in this moment that he will experience the activity and our interaction in this way; however, he does tell me that he likes my drawing, and this is the first day that I’ve ever witnessed him staying with a project to the end.

Six weeks ago, I entered into this job expecting to provide underserved urban teenagers with powerful experiences of self-awakening within a focused workshop environment. What I found instead was a chaotic institutional landscape, a group of

students with wildly divergent resources, limitations, and special needs, and a near-complete absence of onsite supervision, in combination with my own lack of experience as an entry-level expressive arts educator. I've struggled to get them to stand in a circle, much less sustain deep processes of body- and art-based growth, as I had envisioned. This job was intended to fulfill the internship hours required by my training program at the Tamalpa Institute in order to become a certified Tamalpa Life/Art practitioner, and later a Registered Expressive Arts Therapist. With a much less structured and supportive program environment and participants with very different capacities and interests than I had been prepared to meet, these seemingly remedial activities and skill sets aren't at all what I had planned on focusing on during my internship. With all of these unmanageable and unexpected "distractions," I've been afraid that I'll never get to the "real" work and learn how to be a "real" Life/Art Practitioner. In my darkest moments I've felt myself floundering in a sea of bewilderment, shame, and resentment, and wanting to just quit.

In the creative process as well as that of personal transformation, there is no way out but through. When all my implicit fears and limiting beliefs were triggered by the realities of this teaching experience, I was quickly forced to make a choice: either engage with what was coming up for me in response to the situation, or truly fail, either by flight, collapse, or explosion. As my experience with Jay illustrates, in the expressive arts we are given the opportunity to ask ourselves, "How am I relating to the experience of art-making? What thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and impulses are showing up for me, and where else do these themes play out in my life?" In this way, the *process* of creation becomes a mirror to our inner workings, and our teacher. In the very same way, I have found that the experience of facilitating expressive arts processes consistently reveals to me the core personal themes in need of attention in my life at any given time.

Using the tools and models of my personal practice in the Tamalpa Life/Art Process, I took the presenting themes of my "personal mythology," which included fear of failure intertwined with the desire for control over outcomes – "needing" the process, participants, and myself to look a certain way in order to feel successful and secure in my work – into my own studio time. I worked with the Life/Art tools of intermodal movement, drawing, poetic dialogue and written reflection to clarify my challenges, resources, and themes. Over the course of the semester, the focus of my intentions began to shift away from specific outcomes, and toward an *essential orientation*, which can be described as:

- ~ *A practice of collaborating with all that which is beyond my control;*
- ~ *A welcoming of all unanticipated and unfamiliar situations as improvisational opportunities;*
- ~ *The capacity to resource in the midst of doubt and flux;*
- ~ *Connecting with the moment while it's happening;*
- ~ *Dropping ego attachment to the work;*
- ~ *Creating and holding appropriate structure in the midst of creative chaos;*
- ~ *And operating from the assumption that there is genius in me and genius in others, simply awaiting recognition and invitation.*

I experimented with reframing those elements which I once resented as limitations, into *resources*. These new resources included:

- ~ *Uncertainties and questions, both my own and my students’;*
- ~ *Diversity within the group;*
- ~ *The participants themselves, complete with all their gifts, opinions, reactions, and needs;*
- ~ *And my own personal mythology and Life/Art material as it emerges.*

Clearing away some of the most distorting and obstructive elements of my own storyline, I was freed to see more clearly both the gifts and the needs of my students. I discovered that all the information and inspiration I needed was right there, in the expressions of the students themselves; their unique and brilliant gifts were also immediately present, and evident to the attentive witness. I learned the value of leading as a way of sensing, responding to, and holding structure for what was already there, adding to this the more familiar resources of thoughtful intention, planning, and clarity of expectations and boundaries within a solid container. In retrospect the validity of this approach has always been supported in my experience as an artist, in which I consistently find that the most moving, authentic, and transformative pieces are not those in which I have attempted to conquer my medium or imagination through technical prowess, enforcing a prefabricated image of what the experience and outcome “ought to” look like – but rather those expressions which have been shaped by a practice both disciplined and open to unexpected resources, in which I experience myself as a collaborator within a larger creative spirit. In the case of group as well as private sessions, an aspect of that larger spirit is the field created by all participants within the expressive arts space.

As my own orientation changed, the play space within our group seemed to open up, the kids began to both share and listen more, and our time together felt increasingly rich. They jumped up with excitement when I walked through the door toting my bundle of ipod, speakers, craypas and drawing pads; they sometimes complained that we didn’t get enough time together. My source motivation as a facilitator shifted from loyalty to “the work” as a specific form, into excitement for my kids and who they were.

One day after nine weeks of sessions the kids sit down to draw in response to a movement activity in which they were asked to imagine themselves growing from seeds to plants. After ten minutes or so, I ask the students to "pause and take a look at your drawing, wherever you are in the process of completing it for now. If this drawing could speak, what would it say TO YOU?" Though he kicks his feet under the table and talks the whole way through, frequently becoming distracted and returning to his drawing only when I firmly remind him to, Jay has participated with the group throughout the afternoon. He finishes the session with a drawing of a blue and red tree in thick colors and bold black outline; underneath it he writes, "*I am thriving into success.*" When he reads this statement to the group, he keeps his head down, but I see a big smile on his face. Today is the first day I have ever witnessed him write a sentence. After class, he gives me a big hug before running out the door.

I know now that as a guide, I can't take credit for what was, at least in my world, a small miracle. The work itself does this, and the participants do it. My responsibility is to continually hone my own knowings, to clarify my own presence, to be brave enough and devoted enough to surrender, yet stay active – to the process, to myself, and to others. It requires the passion and discipline of the work to let go of all that which blocks my capacity to show up for my own life and to be of service. Clearly, the guiding of processes for others is an expressive arts practice in its own right: it is a call to deep engagement in an unfolding mystery which in itself facilitates personal transformation.

As a guide, one of my primary mediums is relationship. Just as movement can be shaped through space, time, or force, and drawing by color, shape, or texture, the elements of my practice as Life/Art guide exist within the dynamics between myself and my clients, and between myself and my own experience. In the same spirit that I approach expressive movement and poetic dialogue, facilitation as a process is an ongoing experiment with the improvisational interplay of surrender and creative will. As I practice guiding others in the expressive arts, my own capacities for awareness and creative choice-making are developed. My students and clients are co-creators and challengers, teaching me how to deepen and expand myself as an artist and human being. And as I grow, the quality of this relational medium becomes more and more imbued with love. As my ego takes one little step at a time out of the center of my motivations as a Life/Art practitioner, it becomes clearer to me that everything I do, I want to do for love: for the enchantment of the world and its members. Each workshop, each session, is an opportunity to fall in love and to believe in the instinct for wholeness that lives in everyone. To the extent that I can move toward that knowing, my life and my work become my art.

Ashley Crofoot is a somatic movement and expressive arts practitioner based in the greater Indianapolis area. A practicing poet and dancer with a training background that ranges from clinical midwifery to performance improvisation, Ashley is a graduate of the internationally renowned Tamalpa Institute for movement-based expressive arts therapy. She holds a B.A. in body-based expressive arts therapy from Prescott College, and is pursuing a Master's degree in Transpersonal Psychology from Naropa University, with an emphasis in the healing relationship between humans and nature. Ashley currently works in the experiential therapy program at Charis Center for Eating Disorders. She also offers private coaching sessions for individual clients and regularly facilitates movement-based expressive arts workshops in the greater Indianapolis area. She can be reached at ashcrofoot@gmail.com.