

Dancing for Peace in Luanda, Angola, Africa  
**A Tamalpa Leadership Training Project**  
by Dana Swain



I live in Luanda, Angola as an American expatriate. That's a simple statement that belies the profound experience of entering another culture, and such a radically different one at that. Initially, I saw so much that sent my senses and my emotions reeling. I saw people living in conditions of poverty I could not imagine. I saw people without limbs or paralyzed from polio having to beg for money between cars in heavy traffic. I knew the average life expectancy for an Angolan man was 45, and that 50% of children died before the age of 5. I also saw an indomitable, creative spirit in the connections between family and friends, through an easy humor, and through the creativity of song, drama, and dance.

It was the latter that transported me out of my culture-shocked paralysis, and moved me into a place of dedication and inspiration. I knew how movement and dance set my heart free, and I felt that if I could connect on that level with people in Angola, I'd be on my way to finding a healing place for them, and for myself. But first, I had to find a common ground of expression where two cultures might meet, and where art and healing might serve as the medium. I went on a journey in search of such a medium, and I found the Tamalpa Institute

I participated in two Tamalpa workshops the summer before I entered the level one training: Self-Portraits with Jaime Niesenbaum, and Community Ritual with Anna Halprin. At the end of Jaime's workshop, in the closing circle, Jaime said we should take this work into the world. In Anna's workshop we did the Circle the Earth Ritual run in which we each made a dedication to personal and global issues. A seed was planted and I knew then that this was exactly the work I could and would take to Angola.



Following my advanced studies in the Tamalpa Leadership Training, I felt I had the tools to try the work in Angola. Circle the Earth and the Planetary Dance were the perfect dance scores with which to begin. Both these dances address issues of peace and use the 5-step process for healing as a basic structure for the workshop and the choreography. My intention in doing the Dance for Peace was to let youth use their inherent gifts in dance and performance to address issues for peace in their communities.

Angola has recently emerged from a thirty-year civil war, and issues of war and peace are everywhere. As the kids identified within the dance workshop, peace is not just an issue of “not fighting.” Peace is about having clean water to drink, electricity, food, and education. Peace is about a respectful community and government allowing people to do more than survive—it allows them to thrive.

Joy Packard, my peer in the Tamalpa Leadership training, worked with me to create the Dance for Peace in Luanda, Angola, and it was an amazing experience and wonderful success. Joy reflected in her value-actions about the workshop experience: “Working with the physical, emotional and imaginative realms of expression in movement and art enables cultural differences to come forward as well as transcending them. Using the Tamalpa work, I feel alive, I have a place here and a job to do!” We used Tamalpa scores and activities throughout the 5-day workshop, culminating in a performance on day 6. We partnered with the NGO Development Workshop, who assisted in getting the venue, gathering the youth, who all belonged to a group called "Youth Ambassadors for Peace," a structure created by Development Workshop, and generally helped facilitate several of the project details.

There were many profound moments during the workshop and performance. On the fourth day of the workshop we let the kids create their own closing ritual. We broke them into groups of 10 to create their own dances and share them with the group. Joy and I facilitated the discussion of which parts of the dances they had witnessed would be used in the closing ritual. With 50 kids, there was a lot of intense discussion. At one point talks broke down and an argument between two strong leaders in the group ensued, with the rest of the youth taking sides behind these two. This was so reflective of what happens in many conflict situations. We were down to the last 5 minutes of the workshop—there was pressure to finish on time. I brought to their awareness how the conflict was manifesting, and the fact that it was a perfect example of how people get into conflict. I suggested they “move it” rather than talk about it. Within moments, through movement, the conflict was resolved into a dance that blended both ideas of the conflicted parties together. We ended with not one minute to spare, but exactly on time. It was a moment of true triumph and reflected the whole purpose of this work. The youth used the principles they believed in along with creative movement and expressive practices to come to a resolution of their conflict.





The performance on day 6 was electric. During the Earth Run portion of the dance, kids dedicated their run to the women of Angola, to the children who couldn't afford going to school that year, to adequate health care, and many other deeply relevant issues. Then, spontaneously, some kids left the run and gathered members of the audience up to run with them. At another spontaneous moment the kids ushered their witnesses back to their seats and continued their run. At the end of the run, the kids sat back to back, and two kids who'd had a bit of a

rivalry going during the workshop spontaneously spoke out a prayer: One asking for forgiveness, and the other granting his forgiveness. Forgiveness is a powerful, necessary part of peace that naturally manifested for these youth as part of their healing process.

Eunice Inacio, an Angolan woman nominated for the Nobel Peace prize for her work with peace and conflict resolution issues in Angola, was the first to hear of and approve the Dance for Peace project. She was in attendance on the first day and gave a speech during the Earth Run on the performance day. She brought the directors and creators of Development Workshop, and to our surprise and delight they had the dance filmed! After the dance, they decided to make a documentary of it, and to use it to show people not just in Angola, but as an example for all of southern Africa.



My hope had been to give youth in Luanda, Angola an experience of bonding and of exploring issues of peace in their country. I believe we accomplished that goal, but in addition the youth gave me a gift--one of hope. I was overwhelmed with their dedication, their creativity, openness, vitality, and community.

This is a program that will continue with leadership training, and teaching people in harder to reach municipalities. The result, I hope, is that the people of Angola will have other, creative tools to manage their differences, to have new ways to tell their stories, to come into an even deeper sense of respectful community, and to reclaim pieces of their heritage through dance. As Jindanji, a member of the workshop and Dance for Peace performance

stated eloquently in reflection after the dance: *“peace is an aspect of living, not just shutting down guns.”*

Many people helped to make this project possible, and I am deeply grateful and astounded by all the generosity and work that went into this process. Anna Halprin talked with me one afternoon and helped to transform my understanding of the dance to a deeper level. Colleagues from my Tamalpa training class who had taken part in prior Circle the Earth dances helped me with initial scores and their experiences about participating in the dance. Volunteers in the ex-pat community here in Luanda gave their time, their witnessing, and their organizational skills to the project. Chevron donated the entire project cost of \$10,000. My co-facilitator, Joy, flew from England to Africa to help me, worked with me for months before on the scores and activities, and taught me much during the workshop.



The ending is a beginning. Joy wrote in her diary:

*"From the moment the humming starts and the line of linked Youth Ambassadors for Peace comes down the steps into the concourse we just know it'll be all right. They lead the witnesses around their spiral, sit them down, and then they're off. It is beautiful. Full of hope, presence, spirited youthfulness, dreams, fun and souls shining ever so brightly. They even throw in a bit of improvised audience participation half way through. Seamless. The Earth Run wasn't desultory--it was majestic. The prayers were of, and out of, this world. It was a homecoming. It was a performance. It was a ritual.*

*It was theirs."*

Another beginning: Peace Dance Luanda continues with a youth leadership training program . Tamalpa Institute has offered scholarships for two youths from this program to train at Tamalpa Institute in 2007-2008.