

Becoming Woman

by Kristen Rulifson

I am growing up

I am growing out sideways

I am growing down.

As an artist, my mission is to be as available as possible. To let anything come through me, inhabit me, and then let it out of me. It is a practice of hosting. Hosting ancestors, demons, dreams and desires. The practice is in: initiating the doors to open, inviting an entity to stay for a said amount of time with curiosity and without judgement, and then a clear departure. This process of opening and closing expands awareness, reinforces presence, and develops appropriate boundaries. It is from *this* place, I can extend to be a performer, a teacher, a leader, a daughter, and one day a mother. *This* is the place I find my most honest version of me.

Listen to the web

Feel before penetrate

We are connected.

The Tamalpa Institute has granted me the opportunity to study and practice this opening-closing process through the the support of ArtCorps. I leave two years later with tools and resources to provide both myself and those whom I work with the ability to regulate triggers and overcome adversity. One concept I still hold close to me, attributed to Daria Halprin, was the idea of the “edge”. I think of the edge as the in-between space linking normalcy and void. It is fertile, diverse, and cultivates potential for change. This is where all new ideas derive and old knowings transform. It is a living, breathing, transitional space. And— it is dangerous. The rapid chaos is unpredictable and magnifies any blocking of flow causing a damming - a build up- and can result in implosion or explosion: s numbing back to the norm or a free fall in the void. The edge is where I love to live. This moment of unknown gives me hope.

This is my poison.

This is my life support.

I am learning now

Sensitivity as strength

I am unlearning

Today, people and systems are often seeking to implement “resiliency” and “mindfulness” in their students and staff; specifically the contemporary medicine for our underserved youth. Having worked as a health coordinator and community liaison at one the lowest performing school in the Sacramento area, I learned a lot about what is realistic and practical for this type of intervention. I found myself at Encina Preparatory. Although etched with statistics of poverty, crime, and a mere 10% proficiency in math, this school served as a home for many refugees and kids in the neighborhood. Over 90% of the students would depend on this school for their meals, receive basic needs from our on campus



clothing closet and food bank, as well as regular Health on Wheels Van. Achieving mindfulness and presence is a visceral experience that must be consistent- it can't be consumed like a viral video. The change moves to the rhythm of the body and the life cycle of our cells. Many schools are calling for 10 minutes a day of silent meditation. This has proven to be a successful model for implementing mindfulness in the classroom, it is also bite-size for the school to start somewhere and is backed by scientific research, specifically the ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences Study), a study that correlates adverse childhood experiences with health issues later in life. While the school took almost 2 years to implement meditation in the classroom, I began dancing and integrating the Tamalpa Life-Art Process with students after school in the cafeteria. The doors were open to anyone looking for a place to belong. Pretty soon the group grew from 4 students to over 50 students. We traveled around the Sacramento area performing at local food banks, the Crocker Art Museum, and Davis SAYS Summit to name a few. The students would choose a topic of interest they were experiencing at home or in the community (eg domestic violence, immigration rights, school to prison pipeline) and we would write and draw and make music and dance. This became the Encina Youth Dance Company, iDigit. Secondary to self expression followed higher attendance, better grades, job readiness, and college preparedness.

***Tears dissipating
Reuniting sister clouds
Returning to earth***

To be real, the youth dance company at Encina Preparatory no longer exists. Like many programs, they come in and then they can no longer be sustained. I was fortunate to have a job that put me on a campus where I could facilitate an experience for passionate youth to share their stories and express themselves. I hoped with some grants and school support this program would be able to last, however it is not until now as I work as a teaching artist here in the Bay Area that I realize all the extra supports and resources I had developed and learned through the Tamalpa Life-Art Process that truly made a program such as iDigit function. It was the small things- the way I communicated and encourage the students to communicate, to conflict mediate, and how to facilitate an experience that is truly youth led. My role was to support their expression and create a space where truths could be shared incorporating poetry, drawing, dance, and music-making through a trauma- informed approach. I know I couldn't stay at Encina forever, so I went on to develop a program called *Naturally Expressive Leaders*. This is a program that is rooted in pillars of mindfulness, expressive arts, and advocacy. NEL runs bi- annually at the school providing leadership and conflict mediation camps for the students and staff. The program works because it is completely derived by students input and experience. We keep things active, engaging, and take emotional risks. We train the students to be leaders at their school and in their community through learning about triggers, trauma, and communication. Naturally Expressive Leaders has recently partnered with Mutual Assistance Network and the Black Child Legacy Project as well as contributed to the Sacramento community and school districts Trauma- Sensitive Schools Conference as guest lecturers.

I can now sustain

I can support others

Receive and transmit

As I attempt to craft this article, I am overwhelmed with emotions, memories, and frustration. I feel the weight of responsibility to communicate just how effective and necessary a somatic approach is in providing trauma- informed services. We must trace back to the derivative of the nervous system and what happens to the biological body under sustained stress and how the biochemical landscape changes and normalizes to a different calibration when the body experiences trauma. We must do things differently considering the historical and sustained trauma, the media, and the rapid virtual stimulation the next generation is living in.

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My experience with Tamalpa has been a gift to my students, family, and community. The work is living and breathing inside of me. I can't not share it. It affects the way I communicate, respond, create, and reimagine. Two years now, Tamalpa ArtCorps has supported me. I have had the most incredible opportunity to grow into my own body- a birth rite that was perceived as "stolen". When the unwanted touch first imprinted my memory- my shadow, my identity. I practice my rite to fully inhabit my body every day. The Tamalpa Life-Art Process has helped me learn what intrinsic resources I already have and how to start reaching out in my community to both give and receive support .

***I will continue
Breathing into my edges
Radiating love***



Kristen Rulifson describes herself as a "movementologist" dedicating her life to somatic research and human connection. She is the co-director of FloorPlay, an Oakland-based dance company that moves from the ground up; intersecting contemporary dance, acrobatics, and hip hop. She received her Bachelor's (UC Davis, 2014) in Neurobiology Physiology and Behavior and Dramatic Arts, and continued her education as an Expressive Arts Therapist at the Tamalpa Institute as an ArtCorps Scholar. She is currently a

Teaching Artist at Vallejo Charter School and Co-Director of Naturally Expressive Leaders, a program that offers leadership training through expressive arts, mindfulness, and advocacy to underserved youth.