

Tracking Paper
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“It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.”

~ Joseph Campbell

I stumbled into the Tamalpa training program in 2008 seeking change, when I was at a place where my personal mythology was no longer serving me: I desired and envisioned something different for my life.

What I didn't know was that I was embarking on a journey that would shed light on hidden corners of myself and provide me with rich, powerful experiences of learning and growth. These blossomed into ways to generate art, develop teaching skills, and share tools for healing and art.

The first weekend opened with the lighting of a candle, illuminating our intentions for the year. Stepping into a supportive space of ritual, anticipation mixed with anxiety, I chose the theme of cultivating self-love.

Aesthetic response to my theme:

Dear Self,
My intention is to see all the facets that comprise this whole being
To understand what has shaped me
To appreciate myself with gratitude and compassion
And to accept with peace, who I am

My starting point began with a trauma from a miscarriage intertwined with the immediate abandonment of the “father” due to his fear of my infertility. Combining the breath and the spine took my preoccupied mind back to my body.

My 3 Level check-in:

When I remember my miscarriage
I remember the sensation of feeling pregnant
Of the changes in my body, preparing for motherhood.
I remember the feeling of this physical abundance
slipping from my center.
In grief and fear
I imagine that I have abandoned my own child
and my chance for conceiving.
Will I ever be able to have children?

I offer this question to my breath
Inhaling and exhaling the query.
My spine supports me.
My breath supports me.
My breath consoles my mind into stillness
Focusing my attention on the present
In peace for a moment.



“Breathing Through the Spine Drawing”

Breathing, that regular rhythm of a constant life-long transformation and connection to the world, gave me permission to release emotional challenges and sink into the delight of the present. Dances emerged and connections were woven between new peers. Moving on to standing and doing our postures in life scores inspired the creation of a closure ritual to this miscarriage event in my life.

As I identify my grief
and confront my sense of betrayal, anger and guilt
pieces of my experience
are slowly released

I identify my profound loss
Through art making and performance, I confront my anger
Through giving into the present, I release my grief over broken dreams, hopes and
promises
My breath supports me, as I step away to grow.
My breath, my body’s wisdom, is the sacred container for my continual transformation:

Re-Late (excerpt 2010) With Rajendra Serber

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lutrLrG9XQY&feature=player_embedded

I don a mask over a mask over my face.
I hide behind this double-faced mask to keep away from the darkness of what's past.
In grief and fear
I hide behind an armor of indifference.

While working with the head, I identified "fear" as the overwhelming motivator for most of my actions/reactions/non-action in my life. Confusion, Indifference, Anger, familiar friends I have worn outwardly, appeared to have been masking this silent sister.

I am afraid of rejection, abandonment, alienation, pain, death.

I had an injured shoulder and foot during head weekend. In fact I was injured from the very beginning of the program from having performed a Ledoh piece that was described as "an expression of all the pain, struggles and anguish of all my female ancestors" (as one audience member described it). In exploring the head, I found myself huddled in a ball of self-preservation, unwilling to expand my limbs outward or expose my abdomen and chest in a vulnerable state of surrender. I felt this old embodied fear arise. The more it arose, the more physically withdrawn I became.

I fear rejection, abandonment, alienation, pain, death.

To help bring awareness to this heavy fog of fear, I participated in a symposium with several friends where we explored fear for 15 hours. I became well acquainted with the origins of my fear: memories of feeling abandoned by my parents by being left alone in the car in the dark as a child, being ostracized and demonized by my community for racist and religious reasons and for consistently being left for "better" women by my partners.

I fear rejection, abandonment, alienation, pain, death.

Revisiting my childhood fears brought the environment I was raised in to the forefront. Growing up in a small, racist, conservatively Protestant, agrarian community was by far the most challenging element of my childhood.

Memories:

I am 8 years old, walking to piano lessons like I do every Thursday afternoon. A man walks up to me, spits on my face and states calmly "You are ruining our country. You don't belong here. Go back to where you came from." I wonder in silence, "And where exactly is that? Ann Arbor, Michigan?"

"What? You're not baptized? That means that you're demon spawn. Your dad is the devil and you're going to hell when you die. And you can't come to my birthday party either."

I go home from my second grade class to have nightmares that my dad is actually the devil and that I am a witch. I am convinced that I can fly on a broomstick at midnight, but can't seem to stay awake long enough to actually try.

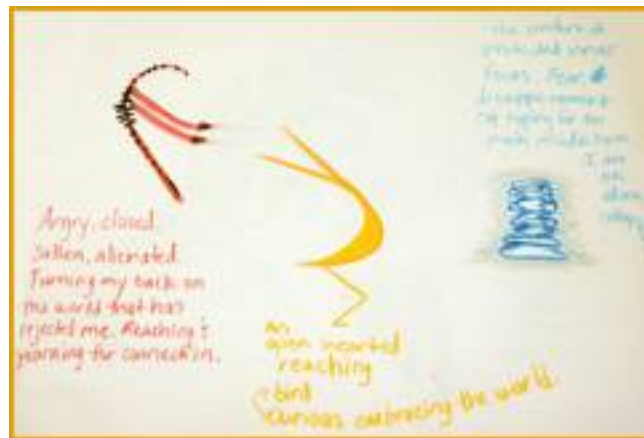
Our best friends, the Jewish family in town, tell me about the KKK and their practice of staking burning crosses on lawns of “people like us.” For many months, I stay awake at night on high alert, afraid that my family will be burned to death by the KKK.

I get a phone call from my mother who tells me that my sister is in the hospital in a coma from an attempted suicide attempt. This is the first of 4 similar calls I receive in 4 consecutive years.

My (now ex-) husband tells me that nobody but he would every want to be with me because I am so difficult.

I fear rejection, abandonment, alienation, pain, death.

Whenever I expressed my fears, hurt feelings, anxieties, my parents would tell me to put up a shield to block everything out. And when I would act out or misbehave, usually through violence or destruction triggered by fear, I became “bad,” “wrong,” “not good enough” for my parents as well. I walked around barricading myself from my environment, my emotions and my humanity, reflected by my well-worn collapsed posture.



“3 Postures”

The comfort of protected inner focus
Fear, disappointment, not hoping for too much resides here
I am OK
alone
collapsed

Despite my practice of protection, the messages of being an overall “bad demon” somehow sticks with me still. I struggle with the internal evil vs. good battle on a daily basis. Slowly I hope to work my way towards acceptance of both without judgment.

Feet and Legs. I have often received feedback about my incredible physical relationship with the sky, as if I were made of fire and air. In contrast, I seemed incapable of connecting to the earth and grounding through my body. As I began to expand my dance vocabulary, I desired to be more grounded. During our feet and legs exploration I somehow managed to injure my foot and spent the entire weekend on the floor, with my legs and feet up in the air, discovering:

Grounded
Fear of being
Grounded
afraid to grow roots
of being stagnant
of not being able to run away
of having to confront
conflict
to stand up for myself

I like to disappear
to fly away
to flee
fast and silent
vanish without a trace
faster and faster
until i am only a passing breeze
not letting anything
anyplace
anyone
Settle on me
or me
Settle
anywhere

I needed something to help me confront my fears. They seemed so big, powerful, overwhelming. They were reflected in the social constructs of this society, of the institutionalized (hidden and blatant) racism and Christianity that we are infused with daily.

I had a dance with Lorena and Julia, two powerful women in my group. We came together and looked carefully around, searching and picking imaginary treasures off the floor, ate them, opened our arms out to the sky, balanced on a wide base of strong pelvises and legs, feet firmly planted, blew kisses, breathed in synchronicity, and leapt. In our dance I discovered my source of support for confronting my fears.

It looks like a long way down.
If I jump, will I fall forever?
There is no bottom that I can see. Just endless fast falling water surrounded by lush
forest.
I look up at the expanse of sky stretching above me, clear, blue, empty with open
possibility.
If I jump, will I fall forever?
Will the sky swallow me up in its infinity?
I can't decide.
Yes jump no jump stay go stuck.
Stuck here on this island of in-between.
I look for answers, inspiration, something to tell me what I should do, where I should go
up?down?stay?
Searching seeing eyeballs peeled for any small sign.
Nothing.
Something falls into my palm.
I taste it.

It expands in my mouth until I have to blow it out in a million kisses.
It gives me strength to lift my listless limbs with my tenacious bite like a mother cat
carrying her young and I remember that the mother father protector caregiver
unconditional lover inside me will always carry me to where I need to go.
To breathing in the beauty,
exhaling life force.
Reminders that trees birds sun wind elements
are here and there inside and outside of me.
Shake off the sticky tar like indecision
and jump!

I jumped into the pelvis weekend, opening up my wounded uterus to find it crowded with
ghosts. My mother, telling me to never have children or they would ruin my life like we
did hers, my sister who can't have children of her own, my aunt who said I should have
children since I'm not doing anything else of value and my ex who had no faith in my
fertility. I had to release them all, expel them from my creation space and allow room for
what I want to hold there.



“Anchor Pelvis”

I jumped into confronting my fears and having a good old shakedown with them during my self-portrait explorations. The “bad demon me” of my childhood managed to resurface during a Soto coaching weekend in which I had an intense confrontation with it. A manifestation of a tangible being with claws, a creeping crawl and a hissing voice with “I hate you all” as its looping mantra. As it materialized I could suddenly confront the multitude of profiles that comprised its existence. Part of me thanked it, for it had fueled my anger mask of protection, of defiance, of protest, of art. I recognized its usefulness and also recognized that it was no longer serving me. I extended compassion towards it, releasing the demon and allowing it to transform into my little girl self, vulnerable, hurt, and needing comfort. In the final moments of coaching, I cradled and held us together with the strength of understanding and care. I enact my (first day of training) theme of self-love.

For my self-portrait performance, I struggled with trying to create something with the same intensity as the month before. It wasn’t happening. My biggest battle was between my performance ego and my desire for authenticity. Not surprisingly, after my performance I was left not with a feeling of accomplishment or empowerment as I had hoped and even expected on some level, but one of abandonment, depression and despair. To feel this way at the culmination of a year’s work was extremely frustrating. I fell into a “vortex of doom” and spent the next month stewing there.

“The vortex of doom” was the month of trials, struggle and treasure. I was faced with feeling challenged and defeated by experiences in my personal life. My relationship was disintegrating, teaching was one disaster after another, performing became unrewarding and work was difficult. I sought out support but was met with solitude. Panic of abandonment arose, and to quell it I turned to the guardian within myself for help. It was

in this space that I discovered how to use the Tamalpa work to turn a negative into a tangible and fruitful positive and to change the grip that negativity had on me.

We all experience negativity--the basic aggression of wanting things to be different than they are. We cling, we defend, we attack, and throughout there is a sense of one's own wretchedness, and so we blame the world for our pain. This is negativity... But if we look into it more deeply, it has a very juicy smell and is very alive. Negativity is not bad per se, but something living and precise, connected with reality.

The basic honesty and simplicity of negativity can be creative in community as well as in personal relationships. Basic negativity is very revealing sharp and accurate. If we leave it as basic negativity rather than overlaying it with conceptualizations, then we see the nature of its intelligence. Negativity breeds a great deal of energy, which clearly seen becomes intelligence. When we leave the energies as they are with their natural qualities, they are living rather than conceptualized. They strengthen our daily lives...."

~ Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

Suddenly things began to shift and *Change* entered my life in a big way. I began taking my personal challenges from life /work as material to create scores. I imparted these to my high school students to perform. Artistically de-centering and altering the relationship with the initial trauma was the key to extracting me from the “vortex of doom.” It provided distance from the event as well as created a productive and often entertaining experience.

This lesson reinforced the words of Daria from that first day of the training, that healing is recognized in the formation of new relationships to our old stories that exist within us. We can't change the events of our lives, we can only change our narratives about those events.

It was in this space that I felt the release of several issues on a somatic level. After sharing a score and having it performed, often with lots of laughter and enjoyment from everyone involved, I could finally feel my shoulders relax, my breath expand my chest, and my head release.

3 Level Check-in:

When I share my score and hear your enjoyment and see your involvement and creativity

My shoulders drop, my breath becomes fuller and my ribs expand.

I feel valuable, delighted and fulfilled.

I recognize that all my life experiences have value
and that I have the skills to create something new with these experiences.

This was perhaps the greatest gift from Tamalpa from my Level One Training. Sharing this gift with my students has led to incredible results. The amount of bonding, expression, creativity, revealing, and sense of empowerment developed has been truly amazing.

Working with this process inspired courage in re-approaching my self-investigation. Looking even further into the depths of what lay beyond my fears, I found grief. At first, personal grief for my loss of my fetus, partner, dreams of parenthood. Later, grief for the injustices of the world. Grief for my ancestors who have suffered from those injustices. Grief for the pains life serves us. Grief for humanity.

I was fortunate in that I was asked to participate in a performance in which I played a mother who had just lost her young daughter, thus offering me an opportunity to bring this grief into art. After a particular show, one audience member who had experienced a similar event in her life, wept and thanked me for the gift of permission to grieve the loss of her own daughter. I dedicated all the rest of the performances to her and to all who had lost their children in their lifetime.

Beneath grief, I found, most surprisingly, love. A deep love of life, everything it offers, the wonders, the surprises, the mysteries. A deep love for humanity in all its shapes and forms, with all its flaws and demons. ("Demon," as Joseph Campbell describes, derived from a Greek word meaning the dynamic of life.) Yes, a deep love for our ability to feel and express our diverse and extensive palette of emotions, our somatic genius, our wild imaginings that have created world wonders and our connection to the energies of our earth. Being reminded of my connection to all there is to love about this world inspired and strengthened my spirit.

This new feeling of expansion was challenged during the Level 2 training. Pema Chodron once noted that our greatest teachers are those that trigger us the most. It proved to be true during this work, with Ken being at the forefront.

I was challenged with his ideas about groups, collaborations and leadership, testing previous ideas.

In one of the first weekends I remember feeling threatened, on an irrational level, that if I started changing my whole ideas about collaborations, I would lose my identity which I had spent so much time and effort creating. Recognizing this enabled me to develop compassion and understanding towards people who feared and resisted change. An uncomfortable unrelenting pressure in the head plagued me while I fought with my old concepts. I developed an appreciation for those who made an effort to change their ways of thinking and being, especially the ones cemented in their beliefs. It's easy to walk into a room with an open door and welcoming arms. It's not so easy to come into a place with a locked and bolted entrance, no keys, and who-knows-what behind its door. Despite my resistance, I did take Ken's teachings to heart and implemented them in my work with my students.

Ken's teachings also pushed me to transform my personal life and extricate myself from an unhealthy relationship into a new space of growth. While necessary, it was a difficult time.

I spent the rest of the summer allowing myself to experience and embody the loneliness and grief of the past few decades that I had staved off with previous distraction. These emotions physically constricted my heart and lungs, put pressure around my head and at times felt like an irreversible sentence of suffocation and death.

Soto's ideas and explorations in nature about "being" vs. "doing" and the creative art mode that encompasses the space in between, acted as a touchstone of sanity and healing for me. It allowed for the validation of my experiences, accepting myself more readily and a slow recovery. Having a half-day to rest in our bodies in nature was truly a regenerative and restorative experience. Sinking in the warm sand, feeling the soft caress of a zephyr, listening to the pebbles rumble with the tide awoke my total being. Muscles, skin, and senses were stimulated, expanded, and plump with experience. I could see with clarity, smell with more richness, touch with more sensitivity, and hear with more depth. Energetic freedom elongated joints, muscles and cells. I often go back to nature and repeat this exercise to remind myself to be present when the tornado of past and future anxieties tries to whisk me away from reality.

Aesthetic response:

Being (2010)

A piece inspired by time in nature with photography by John Felix Kokoska.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YP98ZZkowsE&feature=player_embedded

One idea from Ken that really stuck with me was that peace didn't necessarily exclude conflict. I decided to try that out in a collaboration with Linda and Laura. Uncomfortable. While discussing our ideas, I found myself sitting balled up into a tense fetal position with fingernail imprints in my palms and occasionally sprawled out completely on the deck in sheer frustration and a sense of futility. We had a difficult time finding a way to come up with a score that we could all agree upon, but after arguing, disagreeing, going back and forth and brainstorming, we finally did come up with a score that was extremely satisfying and fulfilling.

I went on to utilize the group-life philosophies of Ken in a performance I co-directed with a colleague at Tamalpais High School, resulting in a great success. Along with this, we used the Life/Art and RSVP processes to generate and organize original material.

In the Dark (2009)

Directed by myself and Kathryn Zdan

Collaboration with Tamalpais High School Students

Photography by John Felix Kokoska

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgDP6QEUVdA&feature=player_embedded

Another valuable tool Ken shared with us was his work on triggers and how to deal with them in teaching/facilitating scenarios. This encouraged me to look at the situations that I commonly get triggered in. One place was with a particular class I was teaching where my issues regarding respect and self-value kept arising. Bringing awareness to the moments when heat would flush my countenance, my jaw clench shut, and my legs stiffen to iron allowed me to recognize my triggers and change my tactics in handling the class. What resulted was everyone's feeling voiced, heard, and valued in the end.

Taira was also a pivotal influence in being a role model for me on how to work effectively with triggers. I would see her get triggered in various situations and then watch her manage herself professionally and compassionately with growth, learning, and respect as a result. Managing my own triggers proves to be a weakness I need to bring more awareness and attention to in all of my relationships, so witnessing Taira's skill was inspiring and instructive.

One of the main issues I deal with on a daily basis is feeling unsafe. In my hyper vigilance I am constantly putting myself into a fight or flight mode with spurts of adrenaline spotting my body chemistry. Sue Martin's lectures brought clarity to the states I was constantly bouncing between and gave me resources for maintaining a more temperate space. I began working with Adriana in her private practice to help separate my fears from reality and bring me into the present. Our sessions usually consisted of somatic meditations of sensing the body in the present, drawings and sculptures, and building boundaries. I use this work in conjunction with the techniques of Sue Martin to help with feeling safer in life. Clear boundaries are a constant struggle with my flexible and inconsistent nature, so practicing grounding in the present is a great help.

This summer offered me a very empowering one-on-one session with Daria that gave me some concrete physical resources for boundary building and self-realization. I began on the security and support of the floor, off which she brought me standing. At first vulnerability and fear stilted my effort to come up on two feet. Eventually I moved to a place of standing on my own-- standing my ground, standing and taking up space, standing with force, standing with firmness and volume in movement and voice. Empowered and liberated, I expanded. I defined and claimed space with a sense that it was my right to do so. I do have a right to take up space. I do have a right to stand up for who I am, for what I want, for how I feel and for what I need.

I do have a right to be.

Beginning at my first day at Tamalpa to this moment of stepping forward into being, I can see how my intention to cultivate self-love is slowly building into realization. Reflecting on my life has filled me with gratitude. I am grateful for the opportunities to develop compassion and understanding through my difficulties. For turning the experience of prejudice and discrimination into spurs urging me to fight for equality, freedom and justice. For engendering humility into my being. For experiencing change on a firsthand basis and creating hope for future generations. For recognizing that the shadows of our humanity allow for the beauty of forgiveness. I know I still have a long

way to go, for evolution doesn't happen overnight, but in looking back, I'm encouraged by how far I've *Grown*.

The world we find ourselves in, the person we think we are - these are our working bases. This charnel ground called life is the manifestation of wisdom. This wisdom is the basis of freedom and also the basis of confusion. In every moment in time we make a choice.

From the very beginning to the very end, pointing to our own hearts to discover what is true isn't just a matter of honesty but also of compassion and respect for what we see.

~ Pema Chodron



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