

Moving In New Ways
By Taira Restar

Samuel stands in front of his pastel drawing. He is coached, “Take a breath. Softly look at your drawing. When you are ready, begin to move your drawing. Choose a color, a shape, an image—what ever inspires you—as a starting point.” Samuel’s dance begins with concentration. His body mirrors circular shapes. He twists in place and circles the room. As he passes the seated witnesses, he lunges towards them. With a grin and direct eye contact, he interacts. Their laughter seems to fuel him. As his dance ends, he is once again with his drawing. His arms form a circle overhead.

15 people are seated for a Check-in Circle. Fiona is asked, “How are you feeling now? Would you show us with a movement, sound or words?” Fiona scoots into the center of the circle. She relaxes into a fetal position with her face tucked out of sight. She lingers in stillness, taking her time. Suddenly she scrambles onto hands and knees and kicks her feet up into the air. She says, “My body is feeling tired and my heart is happy.”

After a somatic movement exploration of the spine, students are coached into an animal dance. Faolan *transforms* into a wolf. As a wolf, she is playful, fierce, fast, growling, howling and engaging with others. After the dance, Faolan draws her wolf and writes the qualities that she and her wolf share.

Bay, Mary and David are seasoned riders. On an overnight trail ride, the horses suddenly become spooked. The terrified horses cause instant chaos and potential danger. Bay yells, “Everybody take a deep breath!” All three riders center themselves through breathing. They are able to calm the horses and create safety.

What do Sam, Fiona, Faolan and Bay have in common? They are all children. They do not know the name Tamalpa Life/Art Process, but they have experienced it many times either as part of their school curriculum or in after school dance or art classes. The Tamalpa Life/Art Process is a movement-based multimodal expressive arts approach. It includes sensory awareness and somatic movement, non-stylized dance, visual art, improvisational performance, singing and sounding, creative writing and dialogue. It is equally suited for adults and children.

Fiona was only 3 ½ years old when she was able to express “How are you feeling now?” through movement and words. She was able to identify and articulate both the physical sensation of tiredness and the emotion of happiness. The daily Check-in Circle, which was facilitated in English and in Spanish, was one part of an emotional literacy program inspired by the Tamalpa approach.

Faolan, the youngest child in her family and in her dance class, discovered that she had much in common with her wolf. While she may be the youngest, she has many strengths. After identifying these qualities, she spontaneously wrote “I love me” on her drawing.

Bay was 4 years old when she led her parents and their horses into safety. She and her schoolmates had been routinely practicing breathing as a personal coping skill and as a resource during conflict resolution.

The Tamalpa Life/Art Process has intrigued, engaged and enriched me for over 25 years. As an expressive arts educator and coach, I am passionate about sharing this approach with children. It gently guides them into embodied self-understanding and self-confidence. It teaches them to think creatively and to problem solve. It offers artistic expression and greater health. It supports the development of communication and social skills. The Tamalpa Life/Art Process offers resources for the lives of individuals, families and communities.

One of my life dances is the dance of being an educator. It is a dance of elbow grease and late-night scoring, of intuition and improvisation, of holding myself as I hold others, of relationship, of creative juices and remembering to take a deep breath when I get spooked. It is often a fulfilling dance, and always includes being a learner.

Recently, after a movement exploration, I asked my students, “What did you discover?” A child answered, “When you dance on your own, you move in the same old ways. When you dance with others, something new can happen. You can move in new ways.” Breathing in, I take in this wisdom. Breathing out, I give thanks for my 8-year-old teacher.

Taira Restar took her first Tamalpa Institute training in 1983 as coursework for a M.A. in Movement Education. She is now on faculty at Tamalpa. She has taught at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), San Francisco State University and Esalen Intitute. She teaches and performs with her mentor, Anna Halprin. Taira is an artist and the mother of a teenage daughter. She is currently writing a book on her expressive arts work with children. www.tairarestar.com
