



Ripening Seeds



Ripening Seeds contributions have spanned the continental United States, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Peru, and many parts of Asia. I look forward to more offerings from our international community. We need to hear many more voices!

Please contact me to discuss your ideas and share your contributions in this important dialogue among IEATA members.

If you would like to contribute, please contact me: kate@kate-donohue.com

The Harvest of Approaches in Expressive Arts Therapy

Editor:

Kate T. Donohue, PhD, REAT

Ripening Seeds is delighted to offer this wonderful contribution from Melissa Michaels. I sense you will be very moved by the healing and social action work Melissa is providing for youth.

Melissa's approach with people in all of life's cycles is called *SomaSource*® which she describes as a path of practice, study, and service that honors the body as a force for individual and collective repair and empowerment while midwifing individuals home to themselves and into their communities as leaders.

She highlights on her website the work she is doing in *SomaSource*® as part of a collective movement that is responding to the evolutionary needs of these times, and says, "We each have a unique journey to make along this dancing path of awakening. Yet there are some basic steps to follow that likely will lead us onto the sacred soils of our own souls and our service in this world. The first step is to say yes. Yes, it is my intention to fully feel, live, and serve life. Yes."

In this writing, Melissa introduces you to seeds of inspiration in her personal life as well as to the *Surfing the Creative*® map, describing her work and how she enacts it with youth. She illuminates in her closing a few applications of her work. Prepare to be inspired and moved by Melissa's *Surfing the Creative*® journey with young people. Thank you. (<http://bit.ly/SurfingTheCreativeFilm>).





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Global Youth Leaders Dancing into Action by Melissa Michaels, EdD

Melissa's Personal Journey

I was pissed. I was moving fast, seeking sanity and safety anywhere I could find it. I was a teen, an obese, enraged, drug dealing white girl with a certain kind of privilege. I was hungering for things that I could not find in the corridors of shopping malls, in the text of my school books, in my job at a steel mill, in the arms of some random guy, nor could I find it in the absent gaze of the so-called adults around me.

Something was missing.

What was missing was a portal to my deepest truths, my wildest dreams, and my life-force longing to be liberated. My hunger lead me many places, some of them straight-up dangerous. I was looking for something—anything—to fill me.

At the poignant age of twenty-one, my hunger was insatiable. Seeking connection with something bigger than the world as I knew it, I journeyed far away from the safety and routine of my life. Air-lifted by fate, I landed in a small village in South India. For months, I taught dozens of young Tamil children. Our classes were held in the embrace of the branches of a huge Banyan tree. With no knowledge of the Tamil language, I turned to the only vehicle for communication the children and I had in common: our bodies.

Every morning I was greeted by bright-eyed children, each delighted to imitate my every gesture. I found myself moving in ways I never imagined possible. Using my body for anything other than numbing my pain was a real stretch. Yet, my enthusiasm guided me to jump and roll, to do whatever it took to explain to these curious young learners the basics of addition and subtraction. I would contort my body into funny shapes, creating moving images to describe their vocabulary words.

Meanwhile, my young Tamil “students” were busy teaching *me*. Their nimble hands crafted beautiful dolls from scraps as they learned to sew and weave with their Mamas. The constantly tended to one another, brushing and stroking each other’s hair with great devotion. Out of nowhere, their voices would spontaneously rise up together, in the middle of cooking their meal of local grains, simply because someone felt like singing. These young people were naturally embodied; a state of being that I, as a fragmented Western girl, would take years to access.

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One particular morning, when I was alone with the children and completely lost in my work of trying to explain things with my antics, a demanding voice began speaking to me from within. Disoriented, I leaned onto a wide root of our Banyan tree as this wave of intense energy washed through me. I felt like I was hearing the cries of the children all over the world. Image of wide open, colorful faces were flashing before me. Their hunger and innocence was so intense that I could barely stand. A message was being delivered intravenously, into my soul:

*Melissa, the children of the world are calling.
You will help raise the children that will help
raise the children.*

That mandate has guided my journey ever since.

In that poignant moment, far from the shores of the familiar, I came home to myself. A date with destiny was made. Not only were the children of the world calling, my soul was calling. I knew that the universal language of movement was where our conversation would begin.



Decades have passed since that fateful day. What saved my life also gave me a life. Over these years, I have danced and danced - until my nervous system calmed down, my heart opened, and my mind cleared. Of course, with all of that movement, the muse began to potently mobilize and actualize through me. I responded to the penetrating calls of my soul *and* the children by

developing and teaching dance-based programs around the world. Ending up in church basements, schools, detention centers, conference centers, village squares, universities, open fields, even the United Nations, I have moved with diverse peoples throughout the life-cycle, especially youth.



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Philosophical Underpinnings and the Structure of Surfing the Creative

Understanding the natural longings that adolescents have for connection with something Great, within and without, I have dedicated my creativity over the past three decades to building communities of practice that foster this kind of true connection. Season after season, hundreds of young people, and the adults who support them, now gather to awaken their creative life-force through a moving rites-of-passage process I developed: *Surfing the Creative*®.

Across race, class, religion, culture, and gender, these young people come together from townships in South Africa, across borders in the Middle East, from refugee settlements, from rural village across Asia, from college campuses, from urban environments, eco-villages, prisons, farms, orphanages. They come seeking to know themselves and to awaken their unique capacities to be the leaders the world so desperately needs. They come struggling with addiction, questions around sexual identity, too many mind-blowing traumas from injustices they do not yet understand. They come longing to be a part of a community that speaks to their souls and supports them unconditionally. They come ready to access and liberate their radically authentic voices. They come with gifts that they are focused on excavating and cultivating for this world.

They come hosting these questions:

- Who am I?
- Who am I in Relationship to Others?
- Who am I as a Creative Being?
- Who am I as a Spiritual Being?
- How can I make a Difference in this World?



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Surfing the Creative® International Youth Rites of Passage Camps are a contemporary example of how the creative process, rooted in dance, assists in the repair, initiation, education, and mentorship of young people as they move into action. Emerging leaders come by choice to journey through this process that begins as a 12-day camp and grows into a life-path for many. The young people are guided through the seven-phased process that I developed, SomaSource®, offering them creative tools to access and/or refine their specific calling in this world, allowing them to move into their lives grounded and empowered to be who they are.

For some, it is the context into which they can complete previously aborted developmental tasks. For others, this work provides them the opportunity to renegotiate traumas, experiences of abandonment or invasion still living in their bodies and in their hearts. For others, it is the place where addictions are faced and, once and for all, are put to rest. For still others, this is the context into which their cultural heritage is seen and valued in ways they had not yet experienced. For all, it is a place where their internal “true north” is accessed and ignited. They find their creative power along with the confidence and inner support to further develop themselves. This allows them to move into the world with greater faith, focus, and freedom.

Specifically, the SomaSource® seven-phased developmental process begins with *Soul Call*®. Young people feel a stirring from within, encouraging them to heal and grow. Honor this call from within, they set their intentions and make a commitment to the rites-of-passage experience ahead. They discover the power of making conscious choices, and the magic that can unfold through fully saying *YES* to something.

Below are a few quotes from the extensive statements of intent written prior to camp:

- “I am really looking forward to Camp...especially with its timing...me leaving home and preparing to step foot into a world where I am the only one responsible for taking care of my needs. It’s nerve-wracking...but it’s inevitable and absolutely essential...and I understand that completely. My intention really is to CHOOSE this life... I feel like I’ve been pushed into it...I want it to be my choice to move into adulthood...”
- “I am healing deeply from the diverse wounds I have inside of me as a result of the different stages of abuse, violence, and addiction I have experienced in my life. Through going to Camp this summer, I seek to continue to heal from these past wounds, to continue to dance through them and keep creating the most absolute beauty in my life...”

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- “I am dark, and blind...more so now than I have ever felt before. It may be only because I’ve just started to allow myself to feel, but it has taken more pain, failure, dishonesty, and disappointment than I have ever experienced to get here. I fear myself. I fear never becoming myself...I am a product of my environment, and it is a product of me, and I hate where I am right now...So, here I am, with this last desperate attempt to break through and topple my entrenched perception of this world and myself...”

- Voices of Youth

Phase Two, *Embodying Life’s Rhythms*, assists young people as they begin to access the wisdom of their bodies. When so many youth are dislocated from the natural world and stable communities, their bodies can become their ground of being, the sacred space through which their consciousness can awaken. Understanding and incorporating cutting-edge, somatic arts for healing and awakening serves to resource the youth



Phase Three, *The Truth of Our Hearts*, addresses the importance of offering young people body-centered pathways for the exploration and expression of their emotions, ultimately opening their capacity to give and receive love. This phase of the process provides young people with tools to unpack and liberate their feelings along with giving them tools to successfully communicate with others.

Phase Four is devoted to *Liberating the Creative Wild Child*, the normal adolescent developmental process of individuation, moving from reaction to creation. This phase encompasses the essential work of peace-making with one’s parents, with those who served, or not, in this role. Through movement-based rituals of transformation, universal concepts of Mother and Father are considered. From there, the youth are introduced to the potential of connection with a

healthy inner mother and father. Once these inner resources are in place, the youth are carefully guided through the body and their imaginative forces into an encounter with their parents of origin.

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The second part of Phase Four is that of the welcoming of the *Creative Wild Child*. When a young person is no longer unconsciously reacting to their family of origin, the creative self can begin to emerge. Creative choices abound. Colorful celebrations of emancipation and authentic expression are ignited. Glimpses are given of the one who is returning from the rites-of-passage journey.

Phase Five encompasses a vast landscape that we call *The Breath of Intimacy*®. By recognizing their creative capacities, beyond that of making babies or trouble, the subjects of fertility, intimacy, and sexuality are overtly introduced along with art-based inquiry into the nature of these powerful energies and how they can be channeled in satisfying and developmentally appropriate ways. This process seeds collective authenticity and curiosity about the changes happening within:

- “Why is it OK for a man to have sex with lots of people, but we call a woman who does that a slut?”
- “Why can love hurt way more than physical pain?”
- “Why is it so easy to get into relationships and so hard to get out of them?”
- “How do I start treasuring my virginity instead of hiding it?”
- “Why can’t I have a wife and a mistress?”
- “How long should a person wait before you make-out in a healthy relationship?”
- “Why do people think that being gay is a choice?”
- “What am I supposed to do with my erection in public?”

- Voices of Youth

Phase Six, *Birthing the Soul*, respects that the adolescent has the potential to be twice born during the rigorous process of growing from childhood into adulthood. At this juncture, we guide the young people through a very specific series of dances and artistic activities the metaphorically replicate the journey from conception through gestation, birth, and the post-partum period of welcoming new life. The focus is on that which is longing to be born through each of the participants: projects, initiatives, next steps invoking and honoring the ever-more adult one who is emerging. Intentions for the journey ahead are shared.

Phase Seven, *Destiny in Action*, helps with integration. Mentors support the young people as they return to their lives to meet their families, their communities, the environment, the world, and their destinies. The brilliant and brave work of these young ones rising onto the world stage is celebrated and supported. The global community bonfire of goodness, truth, and beauty is not ignited by these righteous, creative, diverse, and benevolent youth rising.

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Throughout this whole process, dances are made. Abundant supplies of paint, pastels, pens, musical instruments, clay, glue, fabric, and collage equip the youth as they begin to bring into form what is stirring within. Making the invisible visible, they are moving from destruction into creation; from fragmentation into wholeness; from isolation into connection. The creative pulse has mobilized and empowered a generation of embodied global leaders.



Ripening Seeds: the Actual Work

At this point, I will share with you some of the hundreds of stories of mighty youth who have risen from the ashes into beacons of light around the world:

Arjune who's teacher had slippery and devastating boundaries with him in adolescence. After years of healing through our work, he is today running a community school and a cottage industry serving hundreds of children and adults in his home place. He is married, parenting, and leading with grace and integrity.

Svetlanka, who dropped out of school and wildly ran around her community with an emaciated body, a sassy mouth, and no parents to tend to her. She hid under the table her first day of dancing. Today she is a renowned yoga teacher, an artist, and activist generously bringing justice issues to the front lines of our collective consciousness.

Drew was failing school, burning in his rage, and puddled in his grief over the abuse his girlfriend had faced. Today he has a doctoral degree, a professorship, and a beautiful marriage.

The bright young leaders who fully embraced *Surfing the Creative*[®] as their initiatory process from adolescence into adulthood are now empowering Bedouin women in the Middle East, rapping radical truths on the front lines of Ferguson and Baltimore, tending to the sexual awakening of girls becoming women in Puerto Rico, bringing emotional literacy through the arts into classrooms across the United States, and educating children about indigenous arts in South India.

Contemporary and traditional arts of body, heart, and soul are being woven into their work as educators and activists, hundreds of them, emerging as brave leaders who have transformed their

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pain into medicine and are now building global bridges of peace.

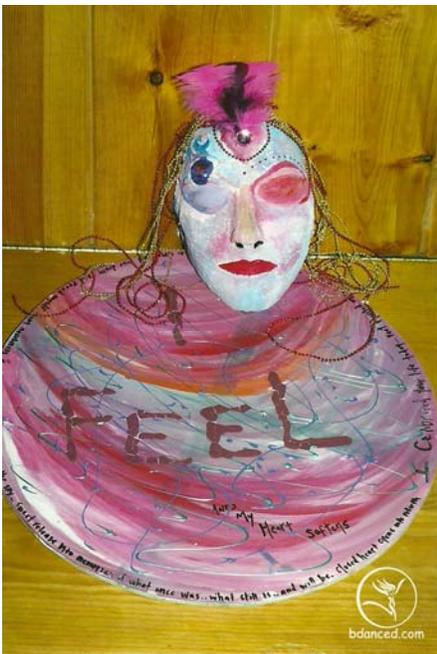
Just a few weeks ago, I sat with our leadership team on the last day of *Surfing the Creative*®. One young woman turned to me and said, “Melissa, you have raised the children who are raising the children.” I burst into tears. Truth was spoken. What was once a mandate from my soul is now a living reality, awakening the souls of many others. Every dancing step that it took to grow this mighty global community has humbled and liberated me, too!

This work is a small drop in a massive sea of need. The work has just begun. If you are moved to join us on this dancing path, you

are welcome. We are dedicated to our collective renewal through the liberation of the creative spirit! As one young woman said, “This work is for me what the developer in a darkroom is. It is constantly helping me realize who I am and who I am becoming, slowly bringing into focus the true colors of myself.” - H.S.

Another woman wrote, “I can truly say that I have been changed, worked, burned, birthed, and blossomed. How wonderful it is to feel at home in my own skin...” - E.O.

Another simply stated, “This work saved my life.” - A.R.



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Ripening Seeds Submission Guidelines:

Please email questions, ideas, or your essay

- Personal Story 500-700 words
- Philosophy 500-700 words
- Actual Work 1100-1500 words

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