

Dear LUTSF,

Please find attached report and images on my attendance at the "Surfing the Creative" Dance Rites of Passage Program in Boulder, Colorado this summer.

### **Introduction**

Last year I ran a dance based rites of passage to develop leadership in young women in the south of England. LUTSF kindly supported me to travel to Boulder to take part in the established "Surfing the Creative" dance based rites of passage global leadership programme which was the inspiration for the UK programme. I got to see how they run their programme and to take part as a participant, whilst also being mentored in developing my own work in this way.

The training took place at a community built dance studio in the Rocky mountains above Boulder, Colorado and commenced on the 24<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

### **The project was successfully achieved and provided many valuable outcomes including:**

- Attendance at all sessions and great insight gained into seeing how dance can be used as a rite of passage to mark individual transition into contributing adulthood.  
Full details on course content and my reflection on it can be found in the accompanying report.
- Strong peer support networks developed with other international dance practitioners working in this way. This was especially valuable as I go forward with this work, as I'm not aware of anyone else working with dance in this way in the UK.
- I was lucky enough to benefit from considerable personal mentoring for programme founder Melissa Michaels around my design and facilitation within the UK programme and how it might evolve in future rounds.
- I was happy to be asked to lead two of the morning warm up sessions before the main days dance session began.
- Additional opportunity arose to be assistance dance facilitator to study under a teacher with three decades' experience in facilitating the 5 Rhythms at the Esalen Institute.
- Funding secured from a USA charity to deliver another round of the programme in the UK this autumn.

### **Highlights of my travels**

One of the things I was most struck by was the friendliness and generosity of the USA dance tribe and how willing participants and instructors alike were to share their knowledge and skills and to welcome in participants from overseas.

This dance based rites of passage work has been happening for 20 years in this particular community in Colorado. The fact that this dance journey is now occurring in a cultural context that has come to widely support the local and international young people in this annual event, was particularly inspiring.

I also loved that there was a purpose built dance studio out in the Rocky mountains for this work to take place in.

### **Advice to Future Applicants**

Dancing outside the UK is different - not just culturally but environmentally.

Despite regularly dancing for many hours a day and having high stamina levels I learned a great deal about flying into a fairly extreme altitude. Boulder is over a mile above sea level and I had given myself several days to acclimatise to the jet lag before the intensive training days started. That said the intensely dry air and considerable reduced amount of oxygen took me longer to acclimatise to than I had imagined. It is worth adding in few extra acclimatisation days before your project starts.

Go prepared with a good stack of business cards - the training is invaluable in itself, yet time with a global network of practitioners can also set exciting new projects in motion.

### **Sharing the information going forwards**

- I will be running another round of the dance based Rites of Passage in Brighton, UK this autumn starting the 10<sup>th</sup> November 2015. Full details can be found at [www.creative-journey.com](http://www.creative-journey.com) Any young woman aged 20- 28 whom is interested in taking part is very welcomed to contact me for further information.
- The global Rites of Passage Network had also invited me to submit a blog article on using dance work in this way.
- The "Journal of Dance, Somatics and Spiritualities" has invited me to write an article for their periodical which I shall be undertaking later this autumn.
- I'm a fellow at the Royal Society for Arts in London and will be writing an online article for circulation to their network of global fellows involved in the arts and social change.

I would like to thank the LUTSF for this fantastic opportunity. It was wonderful to study with such an established programme working in this way and it had deepened my practice both as dancer and as a facilitator, whilst also giving me a strong global support network for developing this work further in the UK.

I'm very grateful to have been able to travel to study this dance work in person this summer and to now be applying my knowledge to running another round of the programme in the UK this autumn.

Very best wishes,  
Tess

Tess Howell

## **LUTSF 2015 Report from Tess Howell who travelled to Boulder, Colorado, to study the use of dance in youth rites of passage by taking part in the established “Surfing the Creative” programme led by Melissa Michaels Ed.D**

### **Background**

I have been studying 5 Rhythms ® dance intensely for 15 years and qualified as an accredited teacher in 2014. I have been working as a contemporary dance producer for the last decade, including leading on the education programme for some of the UK's most well-known physical theatre companies and have had a long term interest in arts based professional and personal development programmes. As well as teaching dance I also work on an embodied leadership course and am particularly interested in using body based awareness for leadership development, whilst exploring how we can meaningfully mark the passage from youth into contributing adulthood and support our young people in finding meaningful work in the world.

In 2013 I saw an online video about “Surfing the Creative” ®- a dance based rites of passage based in Boulder, Colorado and was immensely inspired by this way of working with young people to develop leadership.

In 2014, I secured Arts Council Funding to run a dance based rites of passage to develop leadership in young women in the south of England, inspired by what I had seen of the USA based programme.

In 2015, I applied to LUTSF to support me to travel to Boulder to take part in the established “Surfing the Creative” dance based Rites of Passage Programme led by Melissa Michaels Ed.D - an extremely experienced practitioner, who has been developing her work in this field for several decades and who had kindly mentored me by 'phone/Skype during the first UK round of the programme. Melissa has been working in this way within the Boulder community for many years and as far as I'm aware, it is the only place on the planet where dance is being used in this way.

LUTSF kindly agreed to support me to travel to take part in the established intergeneration Surfing the Creative programme, to study what can be learned, to develop my own embodiment in the dance and to bring that knowledge and experience back with me, in order to support running future rounds of the UK based dance rites of passage programme.

### **About my time on the programme**

The work for the programme started some time in advance of arrival. We were asked to prepare a statement of intent which was sent in advance and helped clarify my specific intentions for my time there. The training took place in the Star House - a wooden community built building, high up in the Rocky mountains above Boulder. The dance space was beautiful - a soft wooden floor with windows all around looking out across the mountains.



We worked there for eight straight full days with some additional evening sessions. There were a large number of trained assistants - those who had been through the dance based rites passage here before, a host of somatic professionals, plus massage therapist and chiropractors who were on hand to address any bodily issue that arose during the dance.

Each day started with an in-depth intensive dance enquiry. The majority of the dance took place to a group of live musicians who responded with tempo changes according to the evolution of the dance enquiry taking place on the floor in front of them. The live music added a layer of depth in relation to the majority of my previous dance practice which has predominantly been to recorded music.

The dance enquiry was based around the map of the 5 Rhythms founded by Gabrielle Roth and has also further developed into Melissa's own Soma-source maps and way of working with the body's innate intelligence through the dance. More of my reflections on the specific course content and how it inspired me can be found below.

No previous formal dance experience was necessary as a prerequisite for participation in the program, yet many participants have been studying these movement maps for many years and the level of skill and experience of the movers in the room was of a very high level, meaning that the dances that unfolded were both moving and beautiful to watch.



Melissa has been developing her work for nearly 30 years and brings an awesome depth of knowledge to the process. As well as getting dancers and non-dancers quickly integrated together and finding new levels of freedom within the body, she also has great knowledge about the developmental process and why working with the body is especially important as part of the rites of passage process.

The sessions were also integrated with visual art and spoken word sessions as well as in-depth enquires about life stages, and what we can learn from the dance to facilitate our healthy movement through the lifecycle. At the end of several sessions, there were opportunities for dancers to share their creative output from sessions.

More reflections on the physiological, psychological and philosophical implications of working with dance, art and the body in this way can be found in the “reflections” section below.

There was a mixed group of many locals and a good few from international backgrounds who were here to study and engage deeply in this specific way of working in order to support them in offering their gifts back within their local community.

I was staying in accommodation with other participants and the informal evening conversations about our practice as dance facilitators were also an invaluable part of developing my practice during my time away. Several of the other international facilitators and I have kept in touch, building invaluable networks of peer support as I go forward in offering this work within the UK context.

I was asked to offer two of the short morning warm up sessions and I felt honoured to be able to offer a little back into that teaching space.



### **Reflections on utilising dance as a rite of passage within a leadership development context; how this shapes my future professional practice.**

In traditional societies a rite of Passage marks a state change from one life stage to another.

This was generally witnessed by the local community who acknowledges and appreciated the growing skills and abilities that the young person has to offer back. In these times of often fragmented city based communities this often does not happen and low levels of confidence, plus self-doubt in relation to having anything to offer can occur.

The dancefloor is ideal for building a temporary community, a tribe of mindful movers. There is a unity to be found in bodies moving in unison in the beat that meets that human need for connection, collaboration, co creation...

There is something about embodied learning that is imperative here. For rites of passage to mark a transition, the individuals undertaking it have to be fully present, there is no better way than being with breath and bodily sensations to call us back to the present time. Dance is an ideal modality for working with young people in this way. The dance is a container that can challenge them and also allow them a space to “freak freely” in a substance free environment as they find safe ways to question the status quo and discover what really does matter to them as they move towards adulthood.

Much of the dance work offered was based on the map of the 5 rhythms - with individuals learning specific somatic skills for self awareness through that process. Melissa has considerably evolved the work in her own ways since then, adding in other facets to the dance education.

I will briefly outline the map of the 5 Rhythms and how it is applied in this situation:

The 5 rhythms is a dance practice that encourages mindfulness through movement. There are 5 distinct stages that are moved through in order -

The first rhythm: flow helps us find our feet on the dancefloor. It is circular, weighty, powerful. It teaches us to check in with ourselves internally, to receive what is really so for ourselves - thus support our growing self awareness and self knowledge.

The second rhythm: staccato teaches us how to express ourselves in relation to others and the wider world. Its movement vocabulary is linear, clear, concise. How can we learn to act and interact cleanly, clearly and concisely; stating our needs simply and with self responsibility?

The third Rhythm: chaos - we work with what the dance can teach us about ways of being with the unexpected. How we can stay with our sure-footed feet in times of great tempo when the waves of the change arise? How we can return to our breathing as a refuge as we move through whatever life is presenting us with?

In the fourth rhythm: lyrical - we look at assimilating what we have learned in the earlier stages. The body is warmed up, responsive, really able to move well through the world. We find repeating patterns on the dance floor, feel at home in our place there. This correlates with the life stage of adulthood - of moving into our work in the world, mindful of what matters most.

In the fifth rhythm: stillness - the tempo slows right down and we move with what is left in the body, hearing the authentic impulses to move. Both being mindful in motion and pausing for moments of sweet stillness to see how far we have come, both in the dance and in life.

Dance is ideal for working intergenerationally and building bridges between age groups. The 5 Rhythms allows individuals to move at their own rate and tempo, to honour the needs of their own body whilst still being part of a moving whole.

Melissa adds many layers of incredible experience, taking the base of the rhythms, evolving it informatively, using a wide variety of sources and thinkers, as well as her own in-depth and thorough enquiries. Melissa is a phenomenal and inspiring force in motion, having set up her own not for profit and engaged widely in bringing this dance work to the world and building bridges between cultures.



Somatic awareness skills gained through dance are an invaluable source of awareness as we transition into adulthood. Young people are presented with what can feel a pantheon of choices as the direction that they want to take going forwards. To develop the ability to listen to our internal somatic signals is

paramount in making health decisions about intimacy and in cultivating good choices in relation to relationships, substances, life situations and the myriad of other options that emerge as we transition into adulthood.

The dance also teaches us how to manage our physiological arousal, this somatic self awareness is invaluable in developing emotional intelligence and especially valuable whilst working with those undergoing the sometimes turbulent transition through adolescence.

We worked within specific gender groups which is a key part of many rites of passage and felt particularly pertinent as the UK program is for young women only. There are many problems particular to each gender and developing a strong network of same sex peers is invaluable for having a healthy support network.

I'm also aware that there needs to be a more through investigation of diversity and building bridges between cultures that would serve the dance scene in UK society.

One of the things that made much of a lasting impression on me is the skill level, not just of the lead facilitators, but also of the whole local support team, which has gradually been built up by training and developing them over the years. The Boulder community has been doing this work for several decades and the experience in the room really helped newer dancers to integrate and move through the rites of passage process. One of the things that I found in instigating the first round in the UK last winter, is that it felt demanding on the facilitation team to hold the group of young women through an intensive three month process. In running future rounds of the programme in the UK more of a broader team will be assembled as we go through the programme; plus the programme will be delivered more intensively over a shorter time period.



It was an honour to study with Melissa and her team who have deeply looked into and developed their dance work in this way. It was a moving and memorable week, both as personal process and for my professional development.

I'm still reflecting on many areas of the practice and I have definitely progressed to a deeper level of my own skill and expression within the dance.

It was amazing to be dancing in the Rocky Mountains and I'm so grateful to LUTSF to have had an opportunity to study this work with Melissa and have an embodied experience of going through the programme this summer.



### **Going forwards**

The next round of the UK programme starts on the 10<sup>th</sup> November and will incorporate my learnings from the USA programme this summer.

Dance and the expressive arts will be used as core tools for professional and personal development, alongside training in effective communication, project management and extensive art based coaching to build personal awareness.

We will work intensively over a 6 week period, developing each woman's own style of embodied leadership and offering teaching and tools to find purpose and a sense of personal power that can serve society in some way. We will develop creativity, confidence and community.

5 Rhythms' dance is one of the key practices of the programme, developing self awareness and self reflection, interpersonal abilities and increasing physical resilience. We believe that embodiment is a key element in developing effective leadership. Leadership can best be defined as influencing others and having an impact in the world. This can take a myriad of forms.

We encourage the women in moving towards working on, with, or for, initiatives that serve society and the individuals within it in some way.

We will dance both indoors and out, using silent disco headsets to allow us to move in a variety of spectacular outdoor settings.

No dance or art experience is necessary but a willingness to engage is essential. No previous leadership experience is necessary. We will work with where each woman is right now. The journey is open to women aged 20-28. For more info please see [www.creative-journey.com](http://www.creative-journey.com)

I would like to thank the LUTSF and its trustees for this amazing opportunity to travel to the USA this summer. It has undoubtedly deepened my practice and enriched my work as a dancer and dance facilitator going forwards, plus has greatly supported the development of using dance to work in this way within the UK.



**All photos are of the USA programme with the exception of this final two shot, which was the first round of the UK Programme taken by Natasha Bidgood**