

# **Surfing the Creative, Catching the Fire:**

***transformational creative youth  
development camps in the USA***



*Power of Hope staff and campers, Bolinas CA (Amber Faur, 2016)*

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# Acknowledgments

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# Executive Summary

I'm a youth worker, performing artist and community development facilitator, and I'm passionate about using creative processes to help young people make positive change within themselves and in their relationships and communities. In June and July of 2016 I travelled to the United States on a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship, to investigate the design and facilitation of transformative creative youth development camps - 'Power of Hope' in Bolinas, California, and 'Surfing the Creative' in Boulder, Colorado. Based on these experiences, I drew out a number of 'key ingredients' for running camps of this nature successfully, including:

*empowering invitations* through strengths-based enlisting of young people as leaders and agents of change, encouraging creative expression in all its forms, offering pathways for youth leadership, and paying careful attention to accessibility and diversity;

*safe(r), inspirational containers* through recruiting and developing a strong, healthy, diverse support team, providing a nurturing space and structure, creating opportunities for more intimate connection through 'family groups', co-creating meaningful group agreements, and consciously building an inclusive, participatory creative culture;

*intentionality, reflexivity and authenticity* through drawing participants' attention both to what was happening and how it was affecting them, and encouraging them to take some responsibility for creating what they wanted and needed from the experience;

*mystery and magic* - capturing participants' imaginations through costuming, ritual, surprise and celebration, and creating spaces and experiences that felt 'sacred', whatever one's spiritual inclinations; offering pathways into exploring one's inner world and finding meaning;

*a peak experience* - orchestrating an encounter with oneself, one's world and one's relationships that is gritty, intense, and challenging, satisfying the adolescent need to take risks and push boundaries, in an integrated, safe(r) and sustainable way;

*commitment, continuity and integration* - ensuring that these experiences can be integrated meaningfully into participants' everyday worlds upon their return from camp.

This research is now being applied to enhance the Auckland-based 'Express Yourself' creative youth development programme for young people experiencing mental health challenges (which I work for), and to inform the community arts and wellbeing workforce in New Zealand more generally.

## Introduction

### Snapshots

*City kids sit silent and enthralled on a windy Pacific coastal clifftop, watching for hawks and seagulls... young queer kids from around the States act out the Orlando massacre to a packed theatre in Boulder, Colorado... one teen starts camp silent, hiding behind his hoodie, and on the final day leads camp counsellors confidently in a landscape drawing class... people of all ages and origins, from the Congo to Jordan to Baltimore to Aotearoa NZ, share love and grief for their worlds, and fire themselves up for change.*



*Young person in mask-making workshop at Power of Hope camp, Bolinas, CA (Amber Faur 2016)*

## To begin

*“A young person is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be lit” - Plutarch, 1000 AD*

As a youth worker with young people experiencing mental health challenges, my role is to help stoke the fires of creativity, passion and determination in the lives of the young people I encounter. In the past, traditions such as rites of passage created transformative space, outside of the everyday, for young people to ‘light up’, mark the transition to adulthood, and create useful reference points for future development. These days, I see first-hand the struggles so many of our rangatahi undergo in finding an authentic and nourishing relationship to the world around them, their peers and themselves. Curious as to whether a modern-day equivalent, in the form of transformational youth development camps, could serve a similar function, I travelled to the USA in June and July of 2016 to research the design and facilitation of two such residential creative arts camps.

## Who I am



*Me leading a dance workshop at Under the Spinfluence Circus Festival, Wainuiomata (Amandala Photography, 2016)*

I’m a dancer, musician, youth worker and creative facilitator, with extensive study and experience in community development. Creative practices, and the communities that built and surrounded them, helped me to find myself, process “hard stuff” and thrive as a teen and young adult. As a result, I’m particularly passionate about helping more young people light up and switch on through meaningful shared artistic experiences. Outside of my ‘day job’ at Toi Ora Live Arts Trust ([www.toiora.org.nz](http://www.toiora.org.nz)), I run a community dance organisation, Nika Dance ([www.nikadance.co.nz](http://www.nikadance.co.nz)) and play in a band called Tamani ([www.facebook.com/TamaniMusic](https://www.facebook.com/TamaniMusic)).



In my role as youth project leader at Toi Ora (in Grey Lynn, Auckland, Aotearoa NZ), I design, co-ordinate and facilitate creative projects for the Express Yourself youth development programme ([www.expressyourself.org.nz](http://www.expressyourself.org.nz)). In this philanthropically funded pilot programme, we work with young people who have experienced or are at risk of developing mental health issues, using creative processes and a non-stigmatizing youth-friendly environment to help foster confidence, resilience, quality relationships and inspiring pathways for the future. We operate in a range of settings, such as schools, alternative education, addiction and Early Intervention mental health services, as well as in broader community outreach. Our work sits within a Positive Youth Development framework and aligns with the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa.



*Flier for Express Yourself young adults' programme, Central Auckland (Toi Ora 2016)*



## Why do this research?

### Personal and organisational benefit

Personally, I have gained knowledge, techniques and understandings which have provided me with greater confidence and capabilities for my own creative facilitation and in the undertaking of ambitious projects such as setting up a residential creative camp here in New Zealand. I have also gained much from the opportunity to network internationally and learn from peers doing similar work in other parts of the world.

Organisationally, the Express Yourself programme thus far has chiefly been delivered via weekly workshops and non-residential holiday intensives. I, and the team I work with, believe that a residential camp, held in a rural environment and over a number of days, would be an extremely valuable addition to the programme. Of course, there are particular challenges – and possibilities – inherent in running an immersive, residential project of this nature, especially with particularly vulnerable young people such as these, so it makes sense to learn from existing models, and then adapt these for our local context.

As such, Power of Hope (PoH), the flagship programme of international non-profit Partners for Youth Empowerment (PYE), offers a particularly interesting model for investigation. Power of Hope was established almost 20 years ago, and offers summer camps for young people aged 14-18 from diverse backgrounds, as well as school-year and adult training programmes, with the mission of “unleashing the positive potential of youth through arts-centered intergenerational and multicultural learning programs that value self-awareness, leadership, community and social change.” PYE was founded by the creators of PoH as their camps gained momentum, recognition and international reach, to consolidate and begin training organisations and practitioners in the 'Creative Communities' model that Power of Hope camps are based on, which according to the organisation

integrates music, rhythm, visual arts, theatre, creative writing, storytelling and movement into the group facilitation and learning process. It also fosters the spirit of a creative community, within which participants are supported to express themselves, take creative risks, learn by doing and are seen and heard by others (PoH, 2016)



*Power of Hope Bolinas camp (PYE website, 2016)*

Another interesting model I discovered is that of Surfing the Creative (StC), an arts-based rites-of-passage and leadership development programme for young people aged 18-28, which is based in Boulder, Colorado and is the flagship programme of a small non-profit called Golden Bridge. This programme attracted my curiosity given the older age group and the aspect of leadership development, as well as the framing of the camp as a rite of passage. Melissa Michaels, the programme's founder, based the camp around the 5Rhythms movement/embodiment practice developed by Gabrielle Roth, who Michaels has studied with extensively.

During my fellowship, then, I have sought to learn from PYE's approach to creative facilitation with young people via PoH's immersive residential youth camp in Bolinas, California, and from Surfing the Creative's dance-based rites of passage programme in Colorado. Upon my return to NZ, I've run my first pilot of a creative arts camp using the PoH and StC models as an inspiration and adapting for the local environment. My target group for

this camp is one I work with already – young people in Auckland who are aged between 17 and 25 and are using 'early intervention' mental health services.

## Wider benefits and significance

New Zealand faces significant challenges at present in terms of youth mental health and wellbeing, with one of the highest suicide rates in the developed world. Many young people have experienced family breakdown, exclusion from school and interaction with the youth justice system. It has now been acknowledged at a national level that there is a need to improve youth wellbeing, and create more imaginative, age-appropriate, access-friendly, culturally sensitive supports and services. It's well known that the earlier mental health challenges are tended to, the more likely they are to be surpassed. However, research also demonstrates that young people experiencing mental health challenges tend to face significant barriers inhibiting their participation in learning, work and community, leading to low self-esteem and confidence, social isolation, unemployment, low aspirations and a host of other negative outcomes. A research study carried out by MIND (UK) in 2009 identified that what was most important for people experiencing mental health challenges were opportunities to lead fulfilled lives and engage in meaningful activities as an essential part of the recovery process.

Creative youth development initiatives offer a particularly powerful opportunity for young people to self-reflect, express themselves, connect with each other and re-engage with work and education goals. Referral organisations tell us that one of the most valuable roles Express Yourself plays is in providing a safe and inclusive environment for young people experiencing mental health challenges to build skills and confidence and prepare for (re)engagement with the wider world, in particular social networks, learning and work opportunities. Our programme's own research (a youth focus group and two think-tank workshops with young people aged 16-24) has identified a strong desire for opportunities enabling young people to take risks, make decisions, build skills and learn alongside peers in a safe, supported and relaxed environment (Walls 2016).

The arts and health field is well-developed overseas - there is substantial international evidence of the positive impact creative arts initiatives can have for people with compromised wellbeing (Bidwell 2014) – and in the United Kingdom, for example, 'arts on

prescription' is now commonplace. However in New Zealand this field is still in early development, and there is little in the way of local models or training for people working in this field, so international experience would be particularly valuable. There are, of course, a number of well-established residential personal development camps for young people in this country, but most of these (such as Outward Bound and Project K) revolve around outdoor pursuits and physical challenges. These camps work well for a lot of young people, but not for all of them – and further to this, young people experiencing mental health challenges are often ineligible to attend these kinds of initiatives. Clearly, there is considerable space for alternative immersive experiences, using creative arts practices as the 'way in' to greater connection, resiliency, confidence and hope for the future.

For my field of interest, then, I anticipate that this research - and the immersive programmes that are emerging from it - will create a precedent for new programmes of this nature that have not as yet been realised in New Zealand, as well as provide much-needed practical tools and accessible knowledge for practitioners in this increasingly recognised field. For Aotearoa New Zealand, I anticipate more young people being connected, engaged, resilient and inspired, and having the tools they need to navigate challenges in creative and effective ways. I see this as a likely result of the provision of a more diverse spectrum of options for engagement in transformational personal development experiences - such as residential creative development camps - and a workforce with the skills and confidence to coordinate and facilitate such processes effectively and safely.

## Key questions

What are some of the key elements to holding transformational creative youth development camps for young people?

How do we manage risks to young people's physical and emotional safety when going through these experiences, especially given cultural, racial, economic and gender diversity, and differing levels of mental wellbeing and resilience?

What helps to integrate these experiences into everyday life?

## Methods - what I did

### Surfing the Creative - Boulder, Colorado



*Surfing the Creative dance process (Golden Bridge, 2016)*

My first stop in the USA was Surfing the Creative - the week-long, dance-based rites of passage and leadership programme run by Golden Bridge in Boulder, Colorado for young people aged 17-30. Daily activities at this camp were held at the Star House, a beautiful and highly original building in the mountains about half an hour from Boulder, and participants were housed in Boulder town, chiefly in Colorado University dorms. This camp's focus is 'embodied leadership', and it has a global orientation and reach, bringing together young people from different parts of the world, all of whom were working in some way with creative forms and social change. Among the attendees of the 2016 camp were two breakdancing teachers from the urban slums of Kampala, Uganda; an Indian woman using drama to help young people experience what it was like to be in a different caste; a young man doing underground circus in Jordan; and a highly political spoken word poet from Baltimore. Given I was only just out of the specified age range myself, I took part in the full rites of passage process as a quasi-participant, as well as taking on some informal mentoring for younger group members. This, along with conversations with the event leader Melissa Michaels, her team, and young leaders who had been through the programme before, gave me a well-rounded, holistic sense of how the process worked and what the impacts were.



## Creativity Explored and Creative Growth - San Francisco and Oakland, California

I next headed to San Francisco and Oakland, and in the few days I had spare before attending Power of Hope Bolinas, I had the opportunity to visit two art spaces for people with disabilities - Creativity Explored ([www.creativityexplored.org](http://www.creativityexplored.org)) and Creative Growth ([www.creativegrowth.org](http://www.creativegrowth.org)) which are historically significant as some of the earliest 'arts access' initiatives coming out of the movement for de-institutionalisation of people with disabilities and mental health challenges in the 1970s and 1980s. These spaces provided the inspiration for Toi Ora's establishment in Aotearoa NZ over 20 years ago. It was exciting to see them 'up close' and experience how familiar they felt, albeit on a larger scale than Toi Ora, and with a focus on disability rather than mental health. On both occasions, I was given a tour of the premises by staff and met a number of the group members working there, who were often eager to show me their work and learn about where I came from.

At Creativity Explored, I was struck by their original and empowering take on an 'artist in residence' programme, whereby a practising artist would come to the space and attempt to learn the art styles of various members, and then the member and the artist would create portraits of each other based on that style. I was also impressed by the merchandising for sale in the gallery, which made members' artwork accessible for purchase in the form of cards, wrapping paper, pens, T-shirts, watches and so on, as well as in the original format.



*Gallery entrance to Creativity Explored, San Francisco (own photo, 2016)*

## Power of Hope camp - Bolinas, California



*My 'family group', "Jimmy and the Wombats", on the final day at the Power of Hope camp (Amber Faur, 2016)*

My last stop was the Power of Hope camp in Bolinas, a small coastal town a couple of hours north of San Francisco. The camp was held at the Commonwealth Centre for Creative Community, a historic piece of land on a wild clifftop overlooking the Pacific ocean. There were indoor and outdoor venues for different events, and the young people camped in tents. The camp was billed as a multi-arts, personal development camp for young people aged 14-18. Each day involved group work on specific issues, and then optional workshops run by co-facilitators/volunteers. Most of the young people who attended came from the Bay Area - some were referred through various youth organisations and some came independently.

In this camp, I was involved as a volunteer 'camp counsellor' - part of a large and diverse team, who shared the work of facilitating workshops and family groups, as well as role modelling participation in the group process for the young people present. In this role I was able to 'experience the magic' of the camp deeply for myself; build quality relationships; and contributed to the experience with my existing skills and passions.



# Findings

## Key ingredients

Below, I've identified key ingredients of both Surfing the Creative and Power of Hope which made the camps 'work' and helped them achieve their goals of empowerment and transformation.

### Empowering Invitations

This section considers the ways in which young people were invited in to be part of the camp experience - in the recruitment phase before it started, in the day-to-day facilitation during camp itself, and upon their return in subsequent years in roles of leadership - and how these methods helped create an empowering and transformational experience for many if not all of those who attended.

#### *Engaging with young people as leaders and agents of change*

In both camps, it was made clear both in promotional material and in the camp itself that the experience would not be simply a summer camp, but an important step in the ongoing work of creating a healthier, happier and more just world - work which, it was made clear, each of us had a part to play in. This had impact in terms of instilling a bigger sense of purpose for everyone there, and also quickly created the "solidarity and significance" (Clarke 1973, 34) required to build a more deeply connected community. For many of the young people present, particularly in the current racially charged climate in the United States, being identified not as a 'problem', but as a key force for positive change, was profound in itself - as one black Oakland teen shared during Power of Hope, "I got the cops following me home every day, waiting for me to stuff up" (pers.comm., July 2016). Therefore, engaging with these young people with hope, trust and belief in their abilities and desires to do good in the world was critically important.

### *Encouraging creative expression in all its forms*

Peggy Taylor and Charlie Murphy, the founders of Power of Hope, have noted that in contemporary Western culture, creativity is overidentified with 'making art', particularly in a professional, virtuoso context (2014). However, creative expression in and of itself, invited in within a context of care and connection, can have great transformational power, which is "rooted in our human need to be seen and heard" (ibid., 17) and which seems to constitute a "magical key for unlocking...hope and resilience" (ibid., 2). In the PoH camp I attended, there were a huge range of creative activities on offer throughout the week, with no bar for engagement, a safe and non-judgmental culture, and a consistent pattern of affirmation and acknowledgement. Carefully-stepped processes encouraged young people to gradually take greater levels of creative risk, and the talent show on the final evening was evidence of the expanse in self-expression taking effect (a feature of this I particularly enjoyed was the "chicken in" option - empty slots in the lineup where people could volunteer to perform at the last minute, which were all well-used!). As mentioned, StC worked principally with a creative movement practice (although it incorporated a number of other creative forms too) with a similar thread of non-judgmental witnessing and expression of 'what is'. In this vein, StC's own Open Mike night encouraged little or no preparation - simply a demonstration of people's existing artistic impulses and expressions..

### *Offering pathways for youth leadership*

A stand-out experience at PoH was the final day, which was almost entirely youth-led. The schedule and routine was well established by this point, so young people stepped in to lead the group and to run workshops, which facilitators were invited to participate in. My personal highlights that day were being coached in an incredibly supportive way by a bunch of uber-cool teenagers from Oakland to freestyle rap, and witnessing one of the (initially) very withdrawn participants confidently leading a landscape painting class and ripping into my and others' attempts with biting critique!

At StC, a clear, stepped pathway for leadership was laid out for community members coming through the programs, whereby following their first rites of passage they could assume greater responsibility for holding and leading elements of the programmes. During the camp,

we also did some useful work considering some of the different elements/identities of leaders, as artists, educators, healers and activists, and how we feel in and lead from each of those aspects of ourselves.

### *Accessibility and attention to diversity*

An extremely crucial - and in some cases, fraught - element of these programmes, particularly in the light of current events and tensions in the United States, was the ways in which they worked to include and embrace people of different races, cultures and genders, among other forms of diversity such as ability and mental health status. It was key that diversity was woven in not as an afterthought, but as a thread of the whole process - and as an opportunity for learning, healing and growth, rather than simply an issue to deal with. Indeed, one of the most moving and transformative elements of the programmes was the very fact that they brought together so much diversity in one space, in a spirit of curiosity and celebration. In Michaels' (2016, 207) words, "The dance of recognising human unity while truly understanding and serving diverse people's realities is critical to the integrity of our shared work." This, of course, required careful attention in the recruitment phase of the camps, in a context of extreme local, national and international economic inequality. Both camps, for example, provided a number of fully funded places, as well as an option for more privileged people to pay more than the price of their own spot in order to support others being there.

During the camps themselves, it was important to name and talk very explicitly about privilege, race and gender, and to invite people both to believe in the work, *and* to question it fiercely, affirming the nature of the process as dialogic and evolutionary - as a living organism rather than a fixed organisation. Michaels, in particular, modelled this practice powerfully by thanking people for speaking up, whatever form it came in, and encouraging people to consider and draw attention to the unspoken tensions between us: "what's the elephant in *your* room?" This led to some intense and confrontational moments, requiring extreme trust in the space-holders and in the practice itself to guide us through and beyond them.

Both camps explicitly welcomed gender diversity, through establishing as common practice that people offered their preferred gender pronouns when introducing themselves. At PoH, a 'third gender' sleeping space was provided for those who did not identify as male or female. The sleeping spaces were then given new, non-gender-specific names such as the Hummingbird Camp. This represented an interesting compromise - according to camp organisers, many parents wanted to be reassured that sleeping spaces would be 'single sex', but current understandings of biological sex, gender and sexual orientation render this distinction arbitrary at best.

Participants were also encouraged to take notice of power dynamics and inclusion as the camp progressed - as the groups became more deeply connected, it was easy to assume a feeling of "oh we're all having the same experience" (Ardnt 2016, pers. comm.), and it was important to remain vigilant as participants as well as facilitators as to how much space we were taking up and who was yet to be fully seen and heard. At StC, we were given some training on the 'Four I's of Oppression' - internalised, interpersonal, institutional and ideological (Espinosa 2016) - which helped provide a framework to consider this topic more deeply. For myself, I experienced a profound shift in how I related to these issues. Upon arriving to the United States, I felt reluctant and defensive about being identified as a 'white American', with all of the privilege and notoriety that came with that label. Over the course of the camps, however, I began to realise that even though I 'wasn't' that, I still experienced privilege as a result of being read as such (for example, my journey through Immigration upon arrival in the US was smooth and hassle-free, and it didn't even occur to me to procure a letter from Golden Bridge or PYE legitimating my visit for customs officials - something which was second nature to my Middle Eastern counterparts). *And*, perhaps, I could play a tiny role in healing and shifting hurt and injustice through my ways-of-being in the camp spaces, in relationship to those particular labels.

## Safe(r) Containers

In the following section, I consider the ways in which the camps constructed safe(r) 'containers' for the transformational work at hand (I say safe(r) as we can never guarantee emotional, social and physical safety, especially for individuals with a history of trauma).

### *A strong, healthy, diverse support team*

Both camps enlisted a large number of adult support people on their teams, with an approximate ratio of one adult or programme graduate for every two young people participating. In both cases, only a few of these support people were paid to be there, but the participatory and inclusive nature of the experiences made them well worth volunteering for. Care was also taken to ensure all staff were well fed and housed, and supported emotionally through the sometimes-intense camp processes.

At PoH, the 'camp counsellor' team had a full training and bonding day together before the young people arrived, and during this time we had our own creative edges challenged as we developed workshops together to offer the young people - some of the more memorable collaborations being Performance Ecology, Samba-style Protest Chants and Experimental Ballet! Being challenged like this, in a supportive environment, helped make the experience meaningful for us as counsellors. Each day at lunchtime we also met as a staff group to check in, deal with any emerging issues, and process emotions that arose as a result of what had occurred over the day.

At StC, the need for physical and emotional support was heightened, given the focus on movement practice, and the emotional depth that was invited in, particularly in terms of engaging with potentially traumatic events and relationships from the past. Counsellors, psychotherapists, body workers and a GP were all on the team, and available at all times to support people emotionally and physically as they needed it, so they could keep returning to the group process. I was struck by how transparent and well-integrated this was - it went a long way towards normalising experiencing distress and getting help for it without being isolated from the community. Michaels also reminded me on a number of occasions that as facilitators, it's crucial that we know well where we are taking people physically, emotionally

and spiritually within the practice: “we have no business leading our young into places we have not embraced deeply in ourselves” (2016, 53).

In both camps, diversity and authenticity was encouraged and modelled within the leadership group. As Sarita in Michaels (2016, 58) explained with respect to StC,

the leadership team does not need to look a certain way, but rather can step into their power as they are. The team is not pretending to be enlightened or fit a specific mold. The leadership team is rich and accessible to many because it is sprinkled with diverse humour, humility and some edge. It is comprised of real people, inviting authenticity and creating inclusion... Importantly, the leadership teams are not separate from the process happening in the room. No one is above or beyond having the dance that is true for them in the moment. This helps encourage and model what full participation looks like, normalising the journey that we are all on. It also sets StC aside from experiences that are orchestrated by adults for youth to consume.

Of course, to ensure that these large and participatory teams were aligned with the goal of making the spaces safe(r), clear boundaries needed to be named and upheld. At a simple level, this had to do with making sure staff knew about risk management issues, and that young people knew all the safety rules. More complex was conveying appropriate psychosocial boundaries for staff within a participatory, dynamic process. At PoH, it was made clear that our role as counsellors was to “offer and be alongside, not download, fix or save” (Arndt pers. comm., 2016), and that when contributing to the larger group, we remained conscious of how much space we were taking up, and did not share “to the point where young people feel the need to take care of us.” (ibid.) Michaels similarly invited caution from all group participants about ‘saving’ or ‘rescuing’ others, and noted that it’s important, when we are moved to comfort another, that we “ask before entering...check in first to see if you are responding to your own need or the other’s. When dialoguing with another, check in to see if your perspective is invited.” (2016, 86)

## Nurturing space and structure



*The Star House, site of most of the StC work (own photo, June 2016)*



Both camps were held as much as possible outside, in beautiful, natural and somewhat remote locations.

While transformational work can happen anywhere, it certainly helps to be held and separated from the rest of the world in these kinds of locations, far away from lots of distractions - ideally also without phone reception! The camps both used a mix of quite rigid overall structure (necessary when managing so many people) and spaces for creativity, improvisation and changes within this.

*Daily Schedule at PoH camp (own photo, July 2016)*



### *Smaller worlds - family groups*

Both camps used the concept of 'family groups' to create more intimacy and safety within the larger groups. Each family group had two or more staff members present, and 4-6 participants. These groups would meet regularly to discuss specific topics and check everyone was doing OK. In both camps, the communication process of Council as outlined by Zimmerman and Coyle (1996) was used, in varying levels of depth, to format these discussions, encouraging speaking from the heart, listening from the heart, opening to receive the other's truths, being of 'lean expression', and spontaneity.

### *Group agreements*

In both camps, agreements were created early in the facilitation process. Both presented a list of already-developed agreements, and offered options for the groups to add to these, while clarifying that these kinds of expectations were required in order to attain the level of depth and presence we wanted to reach in our journey, and calling on the group as a whole to share responsibility for creating such an experience. At StC, 'experienced Surfers' acted out improvised sketches demonstrating first breaking, and then honouring, each of the stated agreements, providing a fun and tangible way for participants to take them on board.

### *Building a Participatory Culture*

A key aspect of making these transformational experiences 'work' was the explicit development of a participatory culture, in which creative expression was an integrated, inclusive and everyday part of community life, rather than something made by experts to be consumed passively by the rest of us (Taylor & Murphy, 2014). Even such seemingly mundane 'housekeeping' tasks such as going over the daily schedule at PoH were turned into opportunities for creative expression - in that case, two volunteers acted out the various steps in the schedule as the facilitator read them out, with hilarious results!

Facilitators gave offerings, suggestions and invitations - "what would it be like to..."; "what if we tried out..."- thus providing the elements of choice and respect for autonomy that are so

important in work with teenagers. They consistently encouraged young people to challenge and stretch themselves creatively, but also to maintain an awareness of what was manageable for them personally and within the group. Melissa at StC described this through the concept of 'titration' - practising repeatedly going in 70% into emotionally intense processes, rather than to meltdown/shutdown point. Thomas at PoH similarly invited participants to work "in between your comfort zone and your freak-out zone - at your learning edge" (2016, pers. comm).

### Intentionality, reflexivity, authenticity



*Mirror art project, PoH camp (own photo, 2016)*

An important element of both camps was the cultivation of an intentional and reflective culture - drawing our attention both to what was happening and to how that was impacting on us, and encouraging us to take responsibility for creating what we wanted and needed from the experience. As Taylor and Murphy (2014, 106) explain,

Reflection allows us to turn experience into learning by looking inside, exploring our attitudes and beliefs, and making new choices about how we want to be.

Unconscious attitudes and beliefs hold the stories of our lives in place. Reflection makes learning conscious so that we can transform experience into tangible change. As such, it is the cornerstone of personal empowerment.

Intentionality was encouraged right from the application processes for both camps, which challenged attendees to clarify - as much as possible - what they were seeking from the experience. At PoH we also created an 'intention tree' - a branch to which we attached paper leaves with pipe cleaners stating our intention for the week - and went through a process of announcing our intentions and having the group share their support for us to achieve them. Over the course of the week, reminders were given to the group to stay on track with their intentions: "What intention did you set for yourself? Are you doing what you set out to do? What more do you want from this experience?" (Taylor & Murphy 2014, 41)

Both camps wove self-reflective practices through the week. Melissa often referred to having "one eye in, one eye out" (2016, 94), or being reflective as well as engaged and aware. Participants learned a number of exercises to promote sensory awareness, and were encouraged to use this awareness when things got challenging: "notice one thing inside your body and one thing outside your body" (Michaels 2016, pers comm). The camps also used family group time as a space for reflection.

Importantly, for self-reflexivity to have any meaning, there needed to be space for people's emotions and experiences to be expressed authentically. Facilitators explicitly gave permission for 'expressing what is' through role modelling and acknowledgment: "If you're feeling shy, dance shy" (Michaels pers comm, 2016); "When I say we're going to do theatre, some of us are probably like "yeah" and others like "ohhh....noo....." (Arndt pers comm, 2016). It was important to "normalise rather than pathologise the powerful and totally understandable feelings coursing through these young people" (Michaels 2016, 113), emphasising that there's plenty in the world to be scared and sad and angry about, and that all emotions are healthy if we can express them appropriately and let them move through us, rather than allowing them to shut us down.

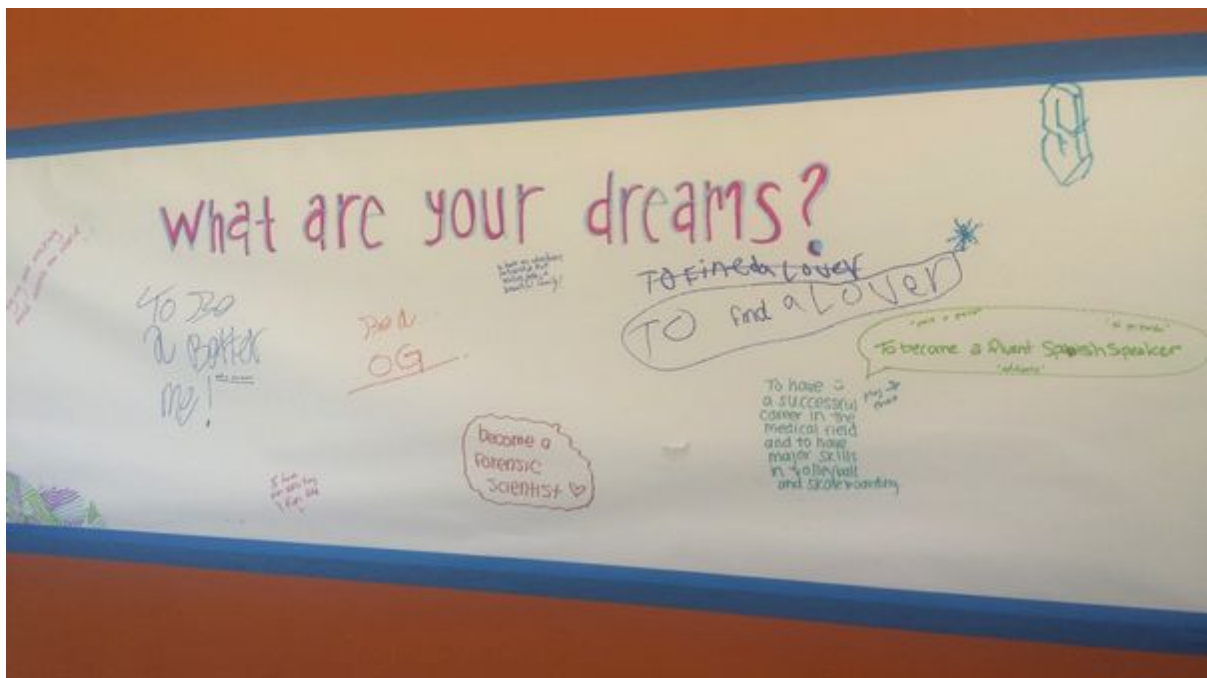
## Mystery and Magic

Adolescents experience a profound cognitive shift that allows them to experience transcendence for the first time...Suddenly they are able to reflect on their lives and ask the larger questions like 'Who am I' and 'Why do people suffer?' And they are able to see themselves as others see them" (Sharon Parks, cited in Taylor & Murphy 2014, 106)

Our work is about re-enchanting the world through arts for everyone (ibid., 3)

As Michaels (2016, 147) states, “young people long for transcendent experiences”, and indeed are at a particularly rich time for spiritual exploration and finding meaning in life. And yet, seldom do schools offer attention to the rich inner worlds of their students; for “the emerging souls of our young people” (Taylor & Murphy 2016, 12). Young people are particularly vulnerable to alienation, depression and despair during this time of heightened sensitivity, and also to seeking transcendent experiences through risky practices.

Participatory arts can offer a healthy, sustainable pathway into exploring one’s inner world and finding meaning. Both camps also sought to capture participants’ imaginations through elements of mystery, costuming, ritual and celebration, and paying careful attention to detail to create spaces and experiences that felt ‘sacred’, whatever people’s spiritual inclinations. The ‘Performance Ecology’ workshop offered at PoH by performance artist Gabriel Christian and environmental educator Marion Hervo was a good example - participants were blindfolded and led to a beautiful place, and then given the opportunity to offer a performance to the natural world around them, supported by the rest of the group.



*Dream Wall, PoH camp (own photo, July 2016)*

## A Peak Experience

Important to both camps was the ritual creation of an emotionally, spiritually and/or physically intense 'peak' experience. In this they followed the structure common to most traditional rites of passage processes, first described by van Gennep (1909) as separation (from the community of origin), transition (through a challenging experience), and then reintegration. Modern proponents of rites of passage work point out that young people instinctively seek out challenging, 'edge' experiences, and if we as their community do not provide safe(r) and constructive opportunities for them to do so, they will find their own, often with tragic consequences. As Michaels (2016, 39) puts it:

How do we as adults in community create situations that allow young people to go to the edge, to walk between the worlds in wild and constructive ways, and to return alive, remembering the details of what occurred during the threshold experience?

Outdoor adventures are a common contemporary form of creating such intense encounters with oneself, one's world and one's relationships, but both StC and PoH chose to use creative processes as their tools of transformation (Plotkin 2008) instead:

We have discovered that we do not need to create an outdoor adventure in order to invite young people to their edges; there is a wildness right beneath their skin.

Engaging with the truths that are lodged in one's soma, or physical body, takes great courage and stamina (Michaels 2016, 90)

Michaels (pers comm, 2016) points out to this end that using the body as our ceremonial space, rather than land, can resonate more usefully in these times when many young people are disconnected from, or do not have access to, what might have been ceremonial land for them in other times. These processes have their own elements of risk, grit and intensity - as a young man cited in Taylor and Murphy (2014, 12) commented, "I now have more fun taking big scary creative risks than I used to have doing things that were bad for me". Further, they can provide an embodied experience of transformation that young people are able to take with them wherever they go.

## Commitment, Continuity and Integration

An important question for youth work practice that involves transformative experiences outside of young people's daily lives is how to ensure that these experiences can then be meaningfully integrated into their everyday worlds. StC and PoH sought to do so in a number of ways:

-ensuring we have enough time together to practice embodying the changes we want to see in ourselves, in our connections with others, and in the wider world, and to make concrete plans to expand these beyond the 'bubble' of the camp experience together:

it's the facilitator's job to remind the young people that the underlying purpose of the gathering is not to create a safe and blissful bubble, but rather for them to return to the larger world more capable of living the lives they want and playing their part in moving towards a more just, loving and sustainable world (Taylor & Murphy 2014, 44)

-reminding young people that outside of the safe containers that we have created in these spaces, they will still need to use discernment as to their safety in self-expression;

-creating satisfying closing rituals with opportunities to become aware of what we have learned, and make commitments to the kinds of change we want to see happen. In StC, participants make a closing statement of intention, which is witnessed by the full group. In PoH, participants drop a slip of paper into a pot, announcing what they are leaving behind, and then pick up a small stone, announcing what they are taking with them;

-preparing for re-entry through envisioning our return, and brainstorming strategies and resources we now have to bridge the two worlds, and help keep what's important about our experience alive;

-creating or pointing towards community support beyond the camp itself, for example through meet-ups, check-ins and online groups, as well as encouraging young people to seek out mentors in their own communities.



*Vision boards at PoH (own photo, 2016)*

## Bringing it home

### Preliminary Experiments

This fellowship helped me to clarify a vision: “Stomping Ground: an Embodied Leadership camp for young people aged 17-25”. I envisage this as a three-day event with young ‘graduates’ from the Express Yourself Young Adults programme.

As a preliminary attempt along these lines, in October 2016 my colleagues and I ran a weekend hui at a retreat space in Piha with Express Yourself creative facilitators, as well as a group of young leaders from the Young Adults programme, to share creative facilitation skills and begin to try out some of the embodied leadership work which I had learned on my



fellowship. The camp was well-attended and feedback was extremely positive, some of which is shared on the following page:

*From young people:*

I feel more comfortable and confident in group situations because of the validation I experienced here. I realised I have a valid, unique, important opinion and it can make a difference in the world. I will try harder to share openly what I think.

I enjoyed eating together, dancing together, smiles across the circle, conversations and encouragement between activities, and feeling connected as a group.

My people skills and sharing skills have increased. I'm able to use them in day-to-day life.

I learned some great new methods for relaxing and connecting with nature and the land, and the idea of writing daily reflections.

*From facilitators:*

Really amazing 'gelling' of the group - connections were clearly made and felt strong and safe. It was great and 'full' - the expected and unexpected occurred. Sense of safety established so everyone felt able to share.

The methods we explored this weekend were very beneficial to me, I really feel that positivity, connection, nature and fun need to be part of a complete system of therapy. It was overwhelming to experience such genuine passion and energy.

Felt fun, safe and liberating and so great to see people open up and some of the idiosyncratic and wonderfully fruity offers that came out.

Absolutely fantastic facilitation... Super respectful, spacious and clear, giving overview first and intention, and then following through on the exercises, with plenty of honouring the wisdom of the reflections - this really drew out the best from our team, and affirmed the inherent knowledge base we all have already.

(Pers. comm, November 2016)



*Express Yourself Piha young leaders/facilitators retreat (own photo, October 2016)*

## Sharing the Knowledge

To begin sharing what I've gained from my Fellowship experience, I've presented learnings from my Fellowship experience at two conferences so far: firstly via an interactive workshop/presentation on creative youth engagement at TheMHS, an international mental health services conference in Auckland in August 2016, and secondly through an experiential installation work at Tahatū Rangi 2016: Re-imagining the mental health and addiction landscape, in Wellington in September 2016. I'm booked to present again on this work at a Creative Conversations hui for community arts practitioners in Auckland in March 2017, and to run an interactive skill-sharing workshop based on my findings at the SYPHANZ (Society of Youth Health Professionals Aotearoa New Zealand) conference in Christchurch in April 2017.

I also presented this work to the RAP Group, a network of people working in early intervention mental health services in the Auckland area, in October 2016. In this group, there was considerable excitement about the idea of integrating mental health care into community rituals and events, thus helping to normalising mental health challenges and

responses. It was noted that when working with a population such as this, it would be important for participants to 'work up to' the experience - going away somewhere new with a bunch of strangers is daunting for many/most of us, and for people struggling with social anxiety and other similar challenges this can be even more acute - so making connections in advance through existing groups, and starting with a weekend trip somewhere not too distant seemed like wise first steps.

Looking forward, I've begun discussing with PYE the possibilities of partnering, and perhaps running a training in Aotearoa NZ for Australasian practitioners.

As I hope I have made clear, then, this Fellowship opportunity has been extremely valuable for my practice and my organisation, and is beginning, I hope, to have significant positive ripple effects on youth wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand.



*Express Yourself Piha young leaders/facilitators retreat (own photo, October 2016)*

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