

2020-21: PERSONAL STATEMENT

Bearing Witness in the Times of Covid-19: A lived teaching philosophy for balancing our Educational Disruption, Social Disconnection, and Physical Isolation.

For me, it is no longer a choice but an imperative that I guide and teach my students in the skills and strategies I have learned over the years that might help them mitigate the stresses and traumas Covid-19 has caused this past year and a half. With educational disruption, social disconnection, physical isolation and online learning, I feel it is my obligation to share these strategies and therefore have designed a new course called TAPS 1280K: Mindfulness and Movement: Interoceptive Expressive Arts. The course evolved over years of training, trial and error and determination to share what I know to be true,

My training in MBSR (Mindfulness Stress Reduction), Heart-Smile Meditation with the Venerable Misan Sunim, Authentic Movement with Janet Adler, my years as a painter and my daily restorative yoga practice combine together and are at the heart of this course. Here we create an environment of *free play*, creative expression, and focused attention with non judgement, and authenticity.

As a long time improvisation based dancer, I had to figure out how to change what I teach in response to what I was seeing in the classroom everyday. Recent studies show that 1 in 3 young adults is experiencing acute mental health issues. I have been witness to it in my online classes this summer. There is a feeling that anything and everything can happen, and it has. What we trusted to always be is no longer. And so I teach them how to ground themselves, give them breathing techniques to calm their minds, hold imaginative writing sessions through journaling, automatic writing, expressive painting, and give them strategies for

self-care and resting. It helps. It works. Brown students are imaginative, generative, and know what they need.

While I am teaching them the applications of ancient Buddhist philosophic texts (while practicing Yoga), I am also teaching them about communication, structure, choice, transitions, poetry, beauty, being present, and that there are no mistakes; they can't do it wrong. The third person knowledge melts into the physical improvisational work. Once in their bodies building strength, flexibility, energetic flow, they are finding resilience to change. The movement meditations heighten metacognition similar to an internal guide regulating attention, comprehension, and memory. It helps refocus us when we get unfocused and keeps us in the present moment to take mental and physical action to move and trust our intuition. In this work one becomes aware of the power the collective can make for change. We frame each class with a personal intention to mobilize those Intentions into becoming a reality. What we work on, on the yoga mat mobilizes beyond the room out into the community and out into the world. These practices are the cornerstone of social change. One person at a time.

Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire.

I heard this once and asked myself, "Where can I start such a fire? What do I care about? What ignites that fire within me? Well, I found it in Mande, West African Dance. Being a modern dancer for many years finally wasn't enough to fuel the fire I felt inside. Modern Dance felt too stylized, unfeeling, tired and conventional. The excitement of West African Dance felt like fire; contagious, luminous, and yet so complex that it has awakened and challenged every bone in my body. In many ways it is like meditation: being in the moment, unifying breath and body, focusing attention to all sights, sounds and rhythms with every stroke of every beat. Here, you are in direct communication with the drummer

non-verbally, surrendering all thoughts and preconceived notions of what you should look like or feel like; just being there listening with your body in a state of pure somatic engagement; meaning all senses are alive, open and generative.

It is fire. It is a heightened state of consciousness

My work has purposely gathered people together across divisions of class, nationality, culture and discipline to co-create art for social change. Through the past four decades I have conducted research on West African Dance and filmed 30 + years of these dances so I could train and mentor students once back at Brown. For years many Brown University students traveled with me to Mali through the UTRA program to learn from the master teachers at The Yeredon Center that my husband Seydou Coulibaly and I built over the last twenty plus years. Brown students actually helped make the red clay bricks to build Yeredon into a fully operational "national treasure," as recently quoted by the Minister of Culture. Researchers are there today even though Brown students haven't been able to travel with us since 2011 due to political upheavels. The future holds promise and so we are planning a full weeks festival in Mali next year to commemorate twenty years of The Yeredon Center.

Since its inception in 1989, I have pioneered the study of Mande Traditional and Contemporary Performance at Brown, serving over 3,000 students from around the world both here at Brown and at the Yeredon Center in Mali. People of French, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, Australian, British, Irish, German, Spanish, and Scottish decent have been part of the Mali -to- Providence Connection. Brown University and the Mande program in particular are known around the world as the center of Malian Dance.

One way I have kept Malian Dance studies alive at Brown has been to invent and institute the Rhythm of Change Festival.

Launched in the mid 1990's as Africanist Weekend; its name was later changed to the Rhythm of Change Festival in 2002 to better reflect the renewed focus on social change and cultural diplomacy. Its purpose has remained the same: to gather diverse communities together for an immersive weekend of workshops, cross-generational conversations, scholarship, community meals, and international performances united around the idea that art and social change are powerful means to hold, create, and heal communities. This lived principle has emerged from 34 years of Mande Dance as a historical and embodied study at Brown.

While we bear witness to the fact that our nation, state, and school was founded on the exploitation of Black and Latinx labor, the Rhythm of Change Festival celebrates the dignity, resilience and brilliance of African and African-Diasporic performing arts and those artists who inspire us to think, feel and act beyond our comfort zones.

As academic communities around the globe awaken to the facts of their own historical complicity with the oppression of Afro-Diasporic and indigenous peoples, the Rhythm of Change Festival offers a space to breath together and move towards a heightened awareness of difference, diversity and inclusion. Through contemplation, celebration, high-powered performances, mindful deliberation and social interaction, it proves that performance is all powerful in bringing people together and from that togetherness we unite around a common purpose of good.

Through these experiences, we also bear witness to the hard questions about how race, power, and authority affect us as a community, a people and a nation. In my courses pre-Covid we held numerous discussions on white fragility, intersectionality, allyship, de-colonizing our power dynamics in the classroom, and sought how we could mindfully decolonize our embodied practices, borrowed from our Euro-centric perspectives and practices.

