



InterPlay
unlock the wisdom of your body

We Make the Bridge by Walking (& Stopping & Running!)

Reflections by Diane Saliba Ault

Exploring the InterPlay of Community Art, Spirit & Activism

Diane Saliba Ault is a certified InterPlay leader, movin' & shakin' in Nashville, TN with over 35 events in 18 months. She is graduated from the leadership program developed by Cynthia Winton-Henry & Phil Porter of Oakland, CA and has one sparkly blue toenail to prove it. There are InterPlay communities in over 50 cities now, and many of those are home to activists, ministers, social workers, artists and other dreamers who have this crazy idea that we can save the world with play!



For almost twenty years, my primary work and avocation has been service as a community organizer and social change-maker working with grassroots groups in the south and linking with groups throughout the world. I've been passionately shedding conformity and putting tremendous energy into gathering people to address social problems and systemic oppressions of many kinds. I am keeper of thousands of stories that I have witnessed as I have seen people choosing to reclaim life, hope and power in the face of stunning losses. I've discovered the deep truth that we are not alone in our desire for a world that works for all. I know in my own body the energy and joy of acting with passion and persistence to make change. It lights me up to pour myself into projects that I think make a difference, or that at least move in the direction of wholeness,

integration, and community–building. As my colleague Pauline, a grassroots woman from Kenya, would say “We are women moving things from bad to better”

Burning my candle at both ends has turned me into a veritable bonfire of a woman. It also might have turned me into a fire–breathing dragon at some points. At my peak a few years ago, I found I was traveling more than I was staying home. I was chairing or staffing about six organizations and participating in about eight more: grassroots development groups, a battered women’s shelter, church related groups, political groups, and a rainbow of support groups. I could see the connections between these people that most couldn’t even imagine, and many times I was drawn to working on projects with people of color where there was little participation from other white people. The friendships I found with people of color are a source of some of my deepest learning about myself and about the world. All this connection was both exhilarating and exhausting! There was a time when I lived alone and had three phones, a fax machine, two answering machines lined up on the side of my bed, and a computer with internet and copy machine within reach. I was literally communicating and connecting constantly! Almost every day I was doing meetings, planning and making stuff happen. Most of this was work without pay. For a long time it was exciting to stretch the limits, to surprise myself and others with creativity and productivity and resourcefulness. I whirled through the work and the world like a tornado and I got LOTS of people caught up in the excitement with me and we whooshed through life wildly. I found others whose visions matched mine and practiced collaborative leadership, developing models and making lots of movement. Mostly our practices and principles were rooted in shared values and principles, sometimes consciously, but mostly we just worked with whoever showed up and then made friends with whoever had the endurance to stay around. Sometimes we lost good people because of the frenzied pace of things. I’ve had many, many experiences of bringing folks together across lines of race, class, culture and religion and have seen firsthand the synergy, enlightenment and depth that comes from honoring “difference” I’ve also experienced the many ways that art (including many kinds of expression) can be transformative with groups that are trying to BE the change they want to see in the world. For example, one project was to get a grant to bring artists and a storyteller in to work with the residents in the women’s shelter. The experience generated profoundly beautiful results on both sides of the equation.

I’ve come to see that the very core, the most transformative roots of social change are in the development of deep human bonds of friendship and love. Looking back over these years, I’ve seen that it was when people opened up and shared a heartfelt story, a poignant or funny song, or when we spontaneously held hands and rocked silently back and forth around a meeting table, THAT was the moment when we experienced solidarity and unity. Those were the elements that really brought us together and gave us glimpses into each other’s souls. These body to body connections were the real glue that held together our various efforts to change the world. I can’t remember what was on the agenda of the Tennessee Hunger Coalition board meeting that night, but I remember Bonnie, a blind woman who was involved in our Rainbow Project, educating multitudes of school children about diversity including disabilities, opening up and singing a beautiful song to close our meeting. Her song was a symbol of the trust, the celebration,

the faith we had in each one's ability to bring their gifts to the process. In these moments, bonfire woman and tornado woman could settle down and actually HAVE a little of the peace she wanted for the world.

The thousands of stories that are filling my memory are the foundation for my hope. They include the stories of my people, my ancestors, (my part-Cherokee grandmother is busy with me every day!) and the stories that come in dreams and visions are all part of the tapestry of change. I know that every body is full of stories in this same way, yet we have a culture that gives us precious little opportunity for the "telling" that can be so powerful as a source of claiming our inner authority. Grace has come abundantly when I've taken the "big risky dances" and leaps of faith, and opened my mouth to speak my truth. At the biggest, wildest points though there was sometimes the feeling of working without a net, of an excited misery, of deep inconsolable suffering, of sleeplessness, of too much grasping for the handholds to keep from flying off of the earth from sheer centrifugal force. There were times of coming unglued from the sheer pressure and instability of extreme multi-tasking. It was very hard on my family relationships and my marriage of twenty years dissolved because I was no longer the same person as the twenty year old who had sought security and comfort through working in a family home-building business. Over time, freedom and change had come to mean everything, even if it meant throwing the baby out with the bath water. My two brilliant children, grown now at 20 and 23, have become wonderful people with these kinds of influences, not too much damage for being somewhat tossed about.

My work generated lots of attention and attracted many kinds of resources. The projects usually flourished but physically I began to pay a high price. I realized I was running on adrenalin and a bad diet, and a few really strange relationships! Finding sacred dance as an integrative process and then InterPlay in 1997 has meant a huge shift in my philosophy and practice of activism and social change. Now I'm dancing and building bridges with individuals and communities with a lot more gentleness, a lot less judgement, a lot more grounding. I'm actually experiencing the peace I want to have in the world a lot more of the time. When I went to "Secrets of InterPlay" in 2001 and decided to take the plunge and create an InterPlay community in Nashville, it was with the full intention to drop back into the simplicity and connection that was the center, the heart of the most successful work I had done through the years. I'm much less attached to the outcomes now, and trusting more fully that people will get a true taste of freedom from these forms. That freedom and choice making is like a ripple generating more of itself. Having more spontaneity, and energy and access to their stories generates an impetus toward being an agent of change.

Each of us becomes lit up in this more gentle, organic way-the changer and the changed—we are touched and moved and inspired and motivated by each other's growth. These rippling movements have political consequences. Releasing fear and self-consciousness and discovering our power to act out of our convictions and imaginations and to move ourselves and others makes us more REAL, more authentic, more compassionate. All of that also has political consequences.

Four years ago I helped organize a gathering of 150–200 United Methodist Women for their National Seminar—social action chairs and presidents from over 40 annual conferences unite. They are women with issues! 11 of them, studied thoroughly over a week, environmental justice, civil rights, healthcare, children’s issues, etc. Four years ago, I was edgy and frustrated doing this work, after pounding my head against many closed church doors for many years, both inside and outside the institutions, chairing the Commission on the Status and Role of Women for the Tennessee Conference, and serving on the National Board of Church Women United as celebrations chair. (sounds like a fun role, but there was a huge Sisyphus factor involved!) I felt burnt from all the years of trying to work at change inside the church so at this Seminar I was a woman with an agenda and an *attitude!* I thought I had to hammer out space and influence for the grassroots women I had invited to subvert the paradigm along with me. The group would be ripe with possibility for networking, but I thought at the time that the only way to get influence and some sharing of their resources would be to muscle our way in with demands and resolutions. I didn’t use the tools that I have now of making room for real connection. I didn’t claim space for the stories, songs and dances (heaven forbid!) that could genuinely move and have these potentially powerful church ladies be truly movers and shakers in their regions.

I’m noticing that this year I’m MUCH more patient, much less abrasive, and potentially much more able to influence and create some grace within this conference. I’ve given myself four years of playing, relaxing, resting more and I’ve sought out relationships that support more balance in my life. I’ve also recently engaged a life coach, Nika Quirk, another longtime InterPlayer who gives the kind of big strong support that big strong magical leadership requires. I’m hired by the UMW this year to create immersion experiences. What will it mean to play with this, to hold it lightly, to be unattached to the outcome, to seek the good, to be incremental in my approach, to be affirming and not so impatient, to let go of any particular outcome? All that will be a change... starting with me. It will be the same conference, same people, same agenda, same world issues— but this time, hopefully I’ll create bridges between myself and the participants and the hosts— by simply walking with them during their week in Nashville. I’ll walk with them into the prison, into the refugee centers, into the community garden, into the legislature with a different spirit. I’m trusting now that I can make the bridges not out of Herculean effort but by simply walking and shining from within.

I’ll probably always have a little of that tornado woman, and that fire breathing dragon woman inside, but my passion and purpose will have a new playfulness and might seem a little less scary and dangerous to people who might want to walk with me, play with me, support me, and love me. We’ll all create the bridges by walking along and singing our songs, telling the stories that live in our bones and making big beautiful dances out of our lives.

I used to think that I had to do everything fast because I was not going to live very long. I felt myself burning up inside for so very long that I knew I wouldn’t last. Now I’m feeling truly middle aged— meaning that I look at my vibrant, smiling, storytelling

grandmother who is 91 and think, that well, I might could sustain this kind of living and loving for another forty years or so!