



Educating & Inspiring Children through THE ARTS

From Kindergarten through High School and Beyond

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I SAW YOU TURN GREEN!

A classroom of second graders watches attentively as I show them a series of ballet steps. "Ballet," I explain, "is supposed to be beautiful. But mime is not always beautiful, particularly if you want to be a lizard."

I hunker down in a wide stance and lean forward, arms lizard-like in front of me. I turn my face to the floor and change my expression. When I lift my head, the audience laughs and leans forward.

I watch my audience as intently as they watch me. As I trundle toward them on my belly, several of them draw back, smiling but cautious. When I'm done, the kids breathe a sigh of relief and clap wildly. One boy seems too stunned to clap. Over the sound of applause, he blurts, "I saw you turn GREEN!!!!"

No, I have not mastered the art of turning green, but I have watched lizards and learned how to copy them. I do this so that I may reflect my audiences' imagination back to them.

The arts are mirrors through which we see ourselves.



Girl dances in front of John Lavery's
1911 portrait of Anna Pavlova

ANOTHER BORING LECTURE?

My Keynote Presentation

The first time I was asked to give a keynote presentation on the importance of arts in education, I could not have been more thrilled. I revel in these opportunities to share my stories and observations with people. I knew that my keynote would fly.

The person who hired me was less sure. She didn't doubt my ability, but she knew what kind of audience I'd have. "The people in your audience are regular classroom teachers who have very little interest in the arts." Later I learned that members of my future audience had already asked for a furlough day, so that they could go Christmas shopping instead of sit through "another boring lecture."

Standing on stage that morning of December 21st, I watched these teachers and administrators file into the auditorium. I have never seen lambs going to slaughter, but I recognized the scene immediately. My audience looked tired, overwrought and irritable. I smiled at people as they came in and not one person smiled back. Many of the eyes were vacant. And the few eyes that met mine, glared back accusingly as if to say, "There's our keynote speaker."

Fortunately, the still, small voice in my head was there to translate this scene for me, 'Karen, these people are not angry with you. They don't KNOW you. They don't resent the arts. They'd rather be Christmas shopping and who can blame them? You'll be fine.'

I knew I'd be fine. I trusted my personal stories to carry the day. I told them about the goose bumps that rose on my arms when I finally mastered the waltz turn. I told them about the personal crisis I went through as a professional ballet dancer, when I realized I'd never live up to my own expectations. I told them about the life-changing moment when a beloved mentor told me to express myself when I danced. Finally, I told them how I work with teenagers -- how I see them as

volcanoes of pressurized energy, sedated by technology, but still intense and ready to explode (in socially acceptable ways).

When I was done, the audience gave me a standing ovation and cheered. Several of them approached me with teary eyes and hugs. My breakout sessions afterwards were packed.

And then it was over. We all went home and resumed our lives.

I came away from this triumphant experience confused and frustrated. I wondered: *How could life go on as usual after such a convincing keynote?* Shouldn't there be a follow-up meeting with the principal? My confusion rippled outward from there: What's wrong with arts advocacy? Why aren't the arts part of every child's education? Why does mediocrity run rampant in arts programming?

In my twenty-plus years of working in the schools, talking with teachers and watching kids in a variety of learning situations, I feel that I have made some important discoveries.

This article represents my desire to share what I know and bring new language to the education table.

LOOKING FOR LOVE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Arts Advocacy

Today's arts advocates look for love in all the wrong places. They appeal to health professionals, claiming that the arts are good for the brain. They appeal to politicians, claiming that the arts bring money into communities. They appeal to educators, claiming that the arts can help raise test scores and student achievement. Then they pay for research to support their claims.

Are we trying to prove the importance of the arts? Or merely how well the arts serve purposes other than their own?

The arts do many wonderful things for humanity, precisely because they remain faithful to one cause and only one cause: **that of enriching the individual's experience.**

It is this singleness-of-purpose that makes the arts vital and powerful – that makes art, ART!

I'm convinced that once we let the arts maintain their *exclusive loyalty* to the individual's experience, our economy will boom, our brains will boost and test scores will skyrocket, but these will be side-effects only when they stop being ultimate goals.



Paris, France, July 2009 - Louvre Museum
couple admires a romantic painting

The Arts:

**MANY FUNCTIONS
SERVING ONE PURPOSE**

*The arts energize, inspire, uplift,
enhance, inform, reveal and
express the individual's
experience.*

THE ARTS: CHANNELS OF SELF-EXPRESSION

Education Transformation

A transformation in education is possible through the arts, but it requires a seismic shift of focus. Instead of approaching the arts as art *forms* or academic *subjects* or more-*things-for-kids-to-learn*, let's restore them to their original signification as "channels of self-expression" and "natural inclinations."

Even the standards-based aspect of arts education, which involves the learning and perfecting of technique, is important only as it allows the individual to express him/herself in more eloquent, original and universal ways.

This is the game-changer! When approached as channels of self-expression, rather than academic subjects, we may begin the process of proving, not only the *importance* of arts in education, but also their necessity.



THE BIRD OF EDUCATION

Consulting the Metaphor

As I see it, there are two, distinctly-different, polar-opposite types of education that function like two wings of a bird. Just as the wings of a bird reach in opposite directions, these two types of education reach in opposite directions to educate the whole child and enhance his/her point of view.

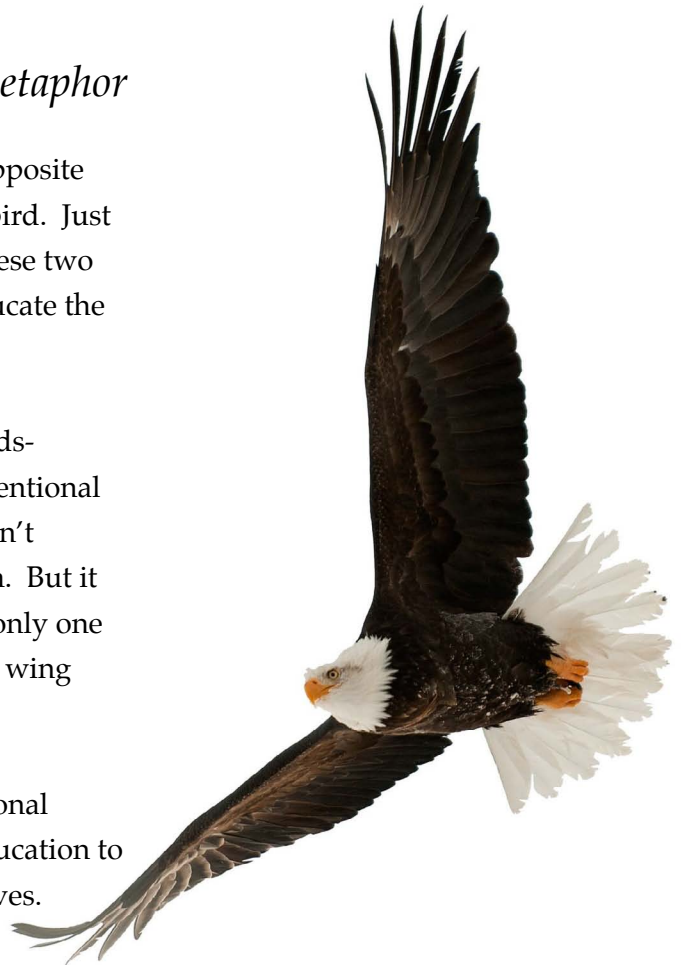
One wing of this “educational bird” is called standards-based education. Standards-based education is conventional education. It teaches kids new things; things they don’t already know. This is an important type of education. But it is only one half of the whole education picture. It is only one wing of the educational bird. And when it’s the only wing flapping, the bird’s in trouble.

The other wing is arts education. In an ideal educational system, this wing functions with standards-based education to uplift and stabilize the system and the children it serves.

While there is no quantitative evidence to prove my bird theory, it holds up to scrutiny when you look at the vital, oppositional relationship between the two types of education.

Take, for example, the claim that an arts education prepares kids for the twenty-first century. All forms and types of education prepare kids for the future, but *how* they do this is key:

Standards-based education prepares kids for their future by teaching them things they’ll need to know when they get there. Arts education prepares kids for their future by enhancing their experience of now.



THE ART STANDARD

Arts education must be held to high standards in order to be useful to education. But the *art standard* is its own kind of standard. It's unique in that it refers only to the individual's experience. If numbers and relative values are used, the individual uses them to assess the degree and variety of his/her own experience.

According to the art standard, a kid can say, "This is a great poem," and be right. Or, "That's a stupid song," and be right. The teacher suspends judgement in the process of zeroing-in on the kid's internal sense of "right" and exposing him/her to higher expressions of that same feeling.

Emily Dickinson defined the highest art standard when she said, *"When I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know it's poetry."*

The highest art standard is this visceral response to art. This experience may be gentle or bombastic, sweet or spicy, touching or thrilling. Only the individual can assess it. Teachers can, however, trust their ability to see it!



Children watching "Saint George and the Dragon." Puppet Theater, Paris 1963
(Photo by Alfred Eisenstaedt.)

While younger kids are more inclined to *show* their inner experience, teens are ready to analyze it.

If teens feel about certain pieces of music the way Emily Dickinson feels about certain poems, then this music is their arts educator. This music will teach them how to feel great and they'll follow this feeling wherever it leads them, unless they have alternative routes to the same feeling or better.

Teens are ready to study their reactions to things, but they need guidance. For example, a rigorous arts education can help them see that their favorite rock stars and rap artists may be fine musicians and their songs may have a great sound. But, like the Trojan Horse in ancient Greece, these fine things about their music may cleverly conceal toxic lyrics and destructive messages. Teens would learn so much from analyzing the lyrics of their favorite songs and developing their own ability to discern a noble sentiment from an ignoble one.

Rigorously aligned with the inner life of children, arts education keeps pace with the expressive strengths and needs of each age. For example, when I design my mime and dance programs, I bear in mind that very young children copy things with mind-boggling accuracy. I use this information to help them gain more control of their movements. Third, fourth and fifth graders are “chompin’ at the bit” to be seen in their full glory; demonstrating physical energy, control, memory and musicality. Kids in middle school are eager to invent and create their own mimes and dances. They need guidance when it comes to bringing their inner intentions to outer expression. High school kids are analytical and intense. The creative energy surging through their bodies demands expression. They need to move in ways that are energized & original rather than seductive and derivative. (Of course there are exceptions to all of the above, but as a rule, these generalizations have been good launching pads for me in designing my programs.)

As channels of self-expression, the arts are more important now than they ever were. They offer natural ways for kids to fly. I’ve heard that public speaking is one of the most stressful things in our culture. An arts education may prove it to be one

of the most exhilarating, when kids find their own voice and stability in the spotlight.

An arts education should be so compelling that it's irresistible and so high-stakes that it's scary. The tension between these two extremes is where self-awareness, self-mastery, and self-expression unfold.



The National Dance Institute in Action
(www.nationaldance.org)

NOTHING RANDOM ABOUT IT!

The Art Standard

"If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?"

– Emily Dickinson

I first heard this quotation while serving on a panel of judges for the Maine Arts Commission. Our job was to assess works of art and deem them worthy of a particular type of recognition. We reserved the 'Dickinson Distinction' for those rare instances when a work of art made us "feel physically as if the top of [our heads] were taken off."

We judged close to five hundred applications that day. Our process was streamlined and efficient. We sailed through the applications, sampling only a few seconds of each video or slideshow before deciding "yay" or "nay." Then a video started playing that stopped us cold. A hush fell over the room. Of one accord, we dropped our pencils and watched the entire video without breathing. When it was over, no one spoke. There was no discussion. Eventually someone said, "Dickinson Distinction" and we moved on.

What struck me about this moment was how unanimous it was. There was nothing random or haphazard about our assessment. We agreed on the Dickinson Distinction without controversy or discussion. This work of art took us out of our heads, beyond our tastes and opinions to the ultimate goal of art: a transcendent, physically-felt, unanimous experience.

In 1986, Vladimir Horowitz, the great pianist, returned to his native Russia for the first time in 60 years. Syndicated columnist, Andy Rooney, watched Horowitz's concert on live-television and wrote about it the next day:

"During the latter part of the concert, watching this 82-year-old genius play, I found mist forming in my eyes for some mysterious reason I could not explain. I was not



sad. I was exultant. It had something to do with my pride, at that very moment, in being part of the same civilization that this great and endearing man playing the piano was part of.

“Almost at the same instant I felt the suggestion of tears in my eyes, the television camera left Horowitz’s fingers on the keyboard and dissolved to the face of a Soviet citizen in the audience. He did not look like the enemy. His eyes were closed, his head tilted slightly backward so that his face was up . . . and one lone tear drop ran down his cheek.

“It was the same teardrop running down mine.”

Even though the highest art-standard defies explanation, there’s nothing random or lucky about it. It’s not a function of talent or genetic happenstance. There are hard and fast rules when it comes to courting inspiration and manifesting our uniqueness. These rules may be explored, experienced and practiced in school.

THE ARTS, TECHNOLOGY, AND SELF-EXPRESSION

Technology is radically changing how kids express themselves. Facebook, Twitter, texting and video games are popular vehicles of self-expression. Likewise, the media is constantly teaching kids what kind of “selves” they need to be in order to fit in.



I believe that a quality arts education (with its focus on the individual’s experience) can teach kids new and vital things about what it means to be physically expressive and expressively alive.

When we learn to draw, for example, we learn to see. We’re taught to draw what things look like rather than what they are. When I was about 7 years old, someone taught me how to make a cup of coffee *look* like a cup of coffee. This was so exciting to me, that I drew only cups of coffee for several weeks after that. I was compellingly drawn to what I learned that day. I was too young to care about the difference between what-something-is and what-something-looks-like. Later, that difference would become important to me. But at age 7, all that mattered to me was making my cup of coffee look right.

Likewise, mime teaches us that we can’t look like a tiger. We can only take on the attributes of the tiger. The more faithfully we take on tiger-ness, the more correct we feel and the more believable our tiger becomes to our audience.

We come into this world singing, dancing, miming, making things, drawing things and explaining things. We gravitate toward musical instruments. We are endowed with this bold expressiveness for a reason and the right kind of arts education can help us maintain it, even as we acquire more experience, control and trust in the creative process.

An arts education does not teach kids how to be artists; it uses the arts to teach kids how to understand, improve and express themselves.

EXAMPLES OF ARTS EDUCATION

An arts education is the cultivation and expression of the individual's experience through art.

In light of this definition, it's possible to find examples of quality arts education happening all over the country. Here are a few:

Recently my friend, Andrew, and I watched an elderly teacher guide a group of students through an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The students looked to be about 10 or 11 years old. They shuffled into the room and gravitated toward the only bench. Before all of them flopped themselves on the bench, their teacher called them over to a painting by Vincent van Gogh. The kids shuffled over to the painting.

The teacher then asked them how much paint they saw on the canvas. They agreed that there was a lot of paint on the canvas, "Gobs of it!" She then took a paint brush out of her bag and invited someone (anyone) to take the brush and imitate the paint strokes they saw in the painting. Several students eagerly volunteered to show this. The kid who ended up with the brush, mimicked the strokes that he saw. The teacher said, "Yes, that's it! Everybody try!" Instantly all of the students mimed a flurry of strong, deliberate paint strokes. This is an example of an arts education sharpening the senses.

The teacher didn't tell her students that van Gogh used lots of paint. She let them see that for themselves.

Also, when she invited them to imitate van Gogh's paint strokes, she let them experience some of the physical energy, so apparent in his paintings. Moving *like* van Gogh, is not only an art lesson but also a lesson in empathy.



Another example of high quality arts education is the PS 22 Chorus, an elementary school chorus from Staten Island, NY directed by Gregg Breinberg.

Even though the kids remained seated while they sang, each one of them moved in his or her own way with great freedom and expressiveness. The movements themselves were compelling, but I was particularly impressed to see that no one seemed at all critical of how anyone else moved. There were no side-long glances at each other. No nervous giggles. No rolling of eyes. Everyone let everyone else be bold, expressive, original and spontaneous.

Finally, one of my favorite examples of a true-blue arts education is the National Dance Institute, based in New York City.

Watching NDI classes and performances, it is crystal clear to me that every child not only deserves the NDI experience, every child needs it!

The National Dance Institute gives young people a chance to tap into and express what they do best - and that is MOVE! They move energetically, intelligently, musically, rhythmically, expressively, exuberantly, both as soloists and members of an ensemble.

When children are allowed to do what they do best, they are allowed to be themselves, to know themselves, to feel good about themselves and to apply themselves to whatever they do.

Examples of high-quality arts education are everywhere, but it's the kind of quality that can't be measured in numbers or plotted on graphs. It's evidenced by watching kids in action and trusting what you see.

RUMI'S FIELD

The Art of Teaching

"Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."

– Rumi

This field is where arts education happens.

The school of right-doing and wrong-doing is important. It's important to learn that $3 + 3 = 6$ and not 7. It's important to hit the right notes during a piano concerto. But it's equally important to spend time in the educational field beyond right-doing and wrong-doing and to bring the lessons learned there to bear on everything you do.

Many years ago, I learned a valuable lesson in the field beyond wrong-doing and right-doing, a lesson that radically changed how I teach.

I was preparing for a performance of *Swan Lake* and struggling with the White Swan variation, particularly the very first step.

My director and coaches tried to help. They talked to me in the language of right-doing and wrong-doing. They reminded me to brush through my first position before springing up into the *rond de jamb développ  *. They'd say yes, that's right or no, that's wrong, or yes, that's better or no, that's not as good. They helped me a lot, but the next day, I'd be back to square one, struggling again.

One day, I had a rehearsal with my dance partner, Bill Pizzuto, a former principal with the Boston Ballet. Bill watched me struggle with that first step. He'd give me some pointers and let me try again. Things went from bad to worse. Eventually, Bill stopped the music and walked over to me. I was tense and frustrated. He put his hand on my arm and met my gaze.

"Karen," he said softly, "you've just made your entrance. You



Karen in 4th position pl  .
Photo: Christa Engelhardt

set yourself up center stage and the music pauses. It pauses for only a brief moment, in order to put your audience on the edge of their seats, to prepare them for this bugger-of-a-step you're about to do. And what do you do? You *brush through your first position!*"

At this, Bill bent over to draw attention to his own feet as he brushed and stopped in 1st position. "THIS," he said pointing to the exact point of contact between his two heels, "is the miracle! THIS is what you've trained all of your life to be able to do and now you're giving it to your audience. THIS will carry you through the rest of the step."

As Bill talked, I felt the goose bumps rise on my arms and somehow I knew I'd never have a problem with that step again. In fact, I couldn't wait for that private/public moment when I brushed through my first position. I always made a point of seeing and feeling my heels come perfectly together, as I said silently to my audience, "THIS is the miracle folks and I'm giving it to you with all the love and sweat that ever poured out of me."

Bill is a natural arts educator. He approached the lesson of right-doing and wrong-doing through the back door of my own experience. He talked to me in a way that made me "feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off."

That's what arts educators do, they teach kids through the kids' experience. They get kids excited about what they're learning. These teachers maintain high standards and they go to the ends of the earth to inspire kids to meet those standards, not because it's the right thing to do, but because these kids are worth it.

Obviously this approach to teaching doesn't confine itself to the arts. All teachers aim to inspire students to learn and to perform well on tests. But the arts exist for the sole purpose of enhancing the individual's experience. And that's why they can teach us so much about the art of teaching and not merely the way to teach art.



Karen with Scott Potter in
Potter's *Tristesse d'Automne*
Photo: C.C. Church

THE BEST TEACHERS ARE ARTISTS

If the whole point of art is to enhance the individual's experience and to approach the individual as a standard unto him/herself, then the best teachers are artists, no matter what subject they teach!

Whenever a teacher has to modify or overthrow a lesson plan in order to connect with a kid, that teacher evokes the artist within him or herself. Every time a teacher lies awake at night, wondering how to communicate with a certain student, that's inspiration knocking at the door, bringing a creative, unprecedented response to the situation.

In the same way teachers listen for inspiration, students look for signs that their teachers will go the extra mile to reach them; not to make them better students but to enhance their learning experience. These are both artistic inclinations, reaching for that vital connection with oneself and others.



*“If you want to build a ship,
don’t drum up people to collect
wood and don’t assign them tasks
and work, but rather
teach them to long
for the endless
immensity of the sea .”*

– Antoine de Saint-Exupery

TWO WINGS OF THE EDUCATIONAL BIRD

The Importance of Opposition in Flight

Arts education complements conventional, standards-based education the way one wing of a bird complements the other.

In many cases, the skills and values of standards-based education are the same as those taught in the arts. The importance of discipline and focus for example. Both forms of education depend on the proper use of discipline and focus. But the real usefulness of an arts education depends on how it *differs* from standards-based education.

For example, standards-based education teaches us that we can always do better. This is true. We can always do better. But without an arts education (as defined in this article), this fact-of-life morphs into the erroneous belief that we're not good enough and we'll never be "good enough" except when everybody else is "less good" than we are.

Children need both experiences: Standards-based education teaching them they can always do better AND arts education teaching them that they are a standard unto themselves. They are enough.

Although these facts appear to contradict each other, they actually complete each other. Like the wings of a bird, they support each other by reaching in opposite directions and saying two different things.



THE BALANCING, OPPOSITIONAL FORCES IN EDUCATION

Standards Based Education

Standards-based education teaches students new things – facts and formulas and procedures that children do not already know.

Arts Education

Arts education concerns itself with what children already know. Kids know what their senses “tell” them. They know what they see, what they hear, and how they feel. Sometimes, what kids “learn” through their senses and their feelings (i.e., due to difficult life-situations, media pressures, video games, etc.) is detrimental to their well-being.

An arts education helps kids unlearn some of the misleading things learned through their senses and feelings. It does this by heightening their ability to find personal meaning in pictures, personal messages in music, empathy in movement and vitality in sensation. In this way, an arts education helps kids rise above their predilections and access broader and higher realms of possibility.



On standardized tests, there is one right answer and many wrong answers.

The “tests” that characterize the creative process are moments of truth, where action is called for but there are no preset goals and no right or wrong ways to proceed.

In such moments, the student experiences a vague sense of possibility, but has no idea what form this will take.

Through such “tests”, the student learns that there are an infinite number of ways to be right and only one way to be wrong. (Paradoxically, the only way to be wrong in the creative process is to let the fear-of-being-wrong take the wind out of your sails.)

“‘What you’re doing’
is not as important as
WHAT ‘what you’re doing’
does to you.”

–Tony Montanaro
world renowned mime artist and teacher

Again, students are well served when they learn to move freely and boldly in both situations: i.e., times when there is only one right answer and times when there are an infinite number of right answers. Both situations need to be fully stressed and equally experienced in order to complete one's education.



On a standardized test, "to know" is to succeed and to "not know" is to fail.

In the creative process, students learn to court the unknown, to go for the half-baked or quarter-baked idea. (They learn that success is often the act of "failing magnificently.")



Standards-based education teaches us that "good" is a relative value, determined by an outside source (i.e., the teacher or system assessing it).

Arts education teaches us that "good" is an absolute value, determined by the individual experiencing it.

*“I’m not interested in
how my dancers move.
I’m interested in **what**
moves my dancers.”*

—Pina Bausch,
director of Tanztheater Wuppertal



Standards-based education focuses on the performance.

Arts education, focuses on the performer.



In standards-based education, to be "the best" is to be better than everyone else.

In arts education, to be "the best" is to be yourself . . . and to begin the life-long process of discovering what this really means.



Both types of education are necessary; not because they cover the same intellectual territory or behave like each other, but because they reach into their own areas-of-expertise and behave differently, all in service to the individual child and the ripple effect that this child has on the world.

ABOUT KAREN

Karen Montanaro is a world-renowned dancer and mime artist, an award-winning choreographer, and the innovator of “mimedance” (a fusion of two classical art forms).

Karen danced professionally with the Ohio Ballet and the Darmstadt Opera Ballet in Germany. For more than a decade, Karen toured and taught internationally with mime master, Tony Montanaro. Karen was wordsmith for Tony’s book “Mime Spoken Here” (Tilbury House Publishers, 1995).

For 25 years, Karen has shared her unique fusion of mime and dance in schools across New England and New York. She uses the universal language of movement to “speak” to audiences of all ages, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds.

Karen believes that our educational system is poised on the brink of an unprecedented advance . . . a transformation based on a careful definition of “art” and a brand new approach to arts education. This article lays the foundation for that approach.

For more information, please visit www.mimedance.com or contact Karen directly at KarenHM@maine.rr.com.



Karen Montanaro