

## A weekend of living frivolously

You may say Imaginal Institute founder Leigh Melander is a fool, but she considers that a compliment

~ By JENNY LOWER ~



Photo by Lucas Deming

he most foolish thing Leigh Melander ever did occurred in graduate school. Having grown up in an academic family on the East Coast (her father was the vice provost at Penn State University), she was attending classes at the Pacifica Institute in Carpinteria, earning her Ph.D. in Cultural Mythology and Depth Psychology. Then the former country singer was offered a gig playing the harp for a show in Reno, Nev. She took a semester off, moved to Reno and spent the next few months being power-lifted through the stage six nights a week wearing false eyelashes and glitter while strumming “Danny Boy.”

The most foolish thing, she says, was spending \$45,000 on “a degree with absolutely no point.”

Fortunately, Melander is the founder of the Imaginal Institute, a hodgepodge of intellectuals, artists, psychologists and educators dedicated to stimulating the imagination by celebrating the foolish, the frivolous and the fanciful. Imaginal, Melander says, refers to “things that live in the idea and the energy of the imagination.” She prefers the term to the word imaginary, which has the unhelpful connotation of being “not real, and therefore not worthwhile.”

“As I look around at what I see is going well and not well in the world,” Melander explains, “the thing that to me is the key to chang[ing] the things that aren’t working is that we need to be able to imagine something different. If we can’t do that, we’re stuck.”

With that noble — if somewhat nebulous — end in mind, last year she invited friends and colleagues (“fabulous people who are very interesting, very bright and very gentle”) to partake in a “Gathering of Fools” aimed at playfully stimulating imaginal discussion and facilitating thoughtful dialogue. The project was such a success the group deemed it worthy of a sophomore effort. The second annual Gathering of Fools, this time co-sponsored by the Joseph Campbell Foundation, took place at the Ojai Retreat Oct. 5-7. Twenty-four attendees participated in sessions entitled “Eccentricity, Leadership, and the Power of Subversion” and “The Poetic Doodle, the Doodling Poem.”

Like “imaginal,” the whimsicality of “fool” can be misleading, seeming to belie any serious intentions. But Melander says the term actually captures the heart of what the group hopes to accomplish with their gathering.

“In archetypal psychology,” she says. “The fool is both the holder of all knowledge and wisdom and the holder of none.”

Relora E. Joyce, a writer who is completing a novel on the biblical Sarah and introduces herself as “Rejoice,” elaborates. “The fool is also the only one who has courage to speak truth to the king. And if we’re willing to be fools ... to the king or society or the powers-that-be ... we can speak truth through our poetry, through our writings, our books, our plays. We are

reaching out to society and saying, ‘There might be something here you want to hear.’ ”

That goal has spurred a surprisingly coordinated effort for such a nominally lighthearted organization. An upcoming event in May with former Pacifica religious studies professor David Miller will explore the intersection between poetry and psychology. Melander is currently building the Fellows program, a loose collective of Institute-affiliated scholars and activists who want a platform to discuss and explore imaginal ideas. And Meandering Press, the literary arm of the Institute, has already published an electronic version of *The Adventures of the Queen of Frivolity: A Fairytale for Grownups*. A printing of Melander’s doctoral thesis, *The Pointless Revolution Handbook: Frivolity and the Serious Business of Subversive Creativity*, will arrive soon.

All this work is not to say the Fools don’t know how to have fun. Their weekend props include a “turkey tiara” and a “rubber chicken staff of power.” They spent the open mic forum telling jokes both sublime and scatological, “and often both at the same time,” Melander says.

The theme of the weekend is authority, a topic Melander says was partly inspired by her own experience of going to conferences and “feeling like I was sitting there at the feet of the masters.”

As a result, she strove to build an environment geared around dialogue. She appears to have succeeded. “We try to keep it as democratic as possible,” she says. “I’ve elected myself holder of the ship, but I don’t necessarily steer it.”

Although external authority will be touched on, Melander says the theme actually focuses on the deeper question of interior authority, an issue that arose when she called on her colleagues to help plan the sessions and was met with a “resounding silence.”

“We’re all struggling with where the authority of our own voices are and where the authority of our own ideas are,” she says. “That gets literalized when you make an invitation like this, because people want it and then they get stage fright and go, ‘I don’t really know if I have anything worthwhile.’ ”

The underlying fear, she says, is “Am I good enough, do I know my stuff

well enough? ... I could really look foolish.”

Being a Fool seems to be about not only combating the societal edicts that stifle the imagination, but vanquishing those same whispers of self-doubt in ourselves. As a result, the schedule (apparently even a ship of Fools needs a guiding wind) is full of activities designed to overcome those fears by embracing them. Later in the afternoon, the group will don Commedia Dell’Arte masks in a session entitled “Authority Ridiculi.” For the moment, they are playing with crayons.

The group stands in a circle as archetypal artist Terri Stiles Alkayali leads them in a series of meditations. Soft music plays in the background as she instructs everyone to feel their crayon, to smell it and, finally, to rest it against their foreheads. They comply, bursting into giggles. Then she instructs everyone to grab hands, and with a flick of her wrist sends a flow of energy around the room.

“I’ll know when it comes back to me,” she says.

Heads slowly turn around the circle until Alkayali exclaims “Ah!” and shivers delightedly. She thrusts her crayon into the air like a sword. “All for one! One for all!” She breaks her crayon in half. The group groans loudly before snapping theirs too and approaching the expanse of paper in the center of the room.

Alkayali switches the music to a pulsing tribal drumbeat punctuated by chants. She orders everyone to draw without lifting their crayon from the paper.

“Let the art speak. Let the art have its own say,” Alkayali says. “Get your ego out of the way, and don’t decide what you’re going to draw.”

Within seconds, people are tracing large swirls on the tabletop or frantically scribbling and rocking in time to the music. After a few minutes, I approach the table. I pick up a crayon and snap it in half. It feels good.

The woman beside me moves aside to make room, and I gingerly begin doodling a loopy green figure. It is difficult to keep the crayon moving, and I can’t help noticing how good the sketch by the girl next to me looks compared to my shapeless mess of lines.

But the music changes and I move down. The woman across from me is pounding her crayon in time to the music. I stop noticing the jokes about auctioning the paper to fund the Institute's projects, absorbed with my creation that falls somewhere between a peacock and a Christmas tree.

The music stops and I rear back, lightheaded. The paper is unrolled onto the floor and we all stand back to admire it. A huge figure-eight in the center alludes to the Institute's motto by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard: "Imagination is the voyage into the land of the infinite." Someone else has drawn the Ship of Fools, and a compass. Everywhere, dazzling snatches of yellow pop up like sunflowers. It is beautiful.

This weekend, Melander says, is her favorite of the entire year. She finds the journey into frivolity "soul-feeding." "It's a turning left when the rest of the world thinks you should move forward. It's a rebellious little move ... I believe in little revolutions."

From her words, the Gathering's biggest accomplishment may be the space it provides for these interior revolutions to unfold.

"I can be in this place where I can be imagining," Melander says quietly, "and maybe be imagined, too."

*For more information on the Imaginal Institute, visit [www.imaginalinstitute.com](http://www.imaginalinstitute.com).*

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