

## **A Deeper Side of Dance** by Saadi Neil Douglas-Klotz

(Originally written as a column for "We Circle Around," the newsletter of the International Network of the Dances of Universal Peace between 1996-2006.)

(March 1996)

### **#1 The Living Compost of Our Experiences**

No doubt, the last century has witnessed one of the most remarkable spiritual movements in human history: the rise of the "12-step" groups originally associated with Alcoholic Anonymous. Worldwide, these groups have helped more people addicted to various substances than all other therapies combined.

From a spiritual point of view, their appeal and success stem from a simple proposition: human beings achieve health in relation to each other and their environment by surrendering to a "Higher Power," however defined. In his visionary poem-cycle "The Jerusalem Trilogy," Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, founder of the Dances says something similar. To free itself from the chains of both material-economic and mental-ideological domination and oppression, humanity needs to recognize the divine. To achieve truly universal peace, we need to remember that we live, breathe and move in a Sacred Universe. Everything that prevents us from feeling this Unity is "addictive" to use the current term. Buddhism might call it "samsara," Hinduism "maya" and Sufism "hijab."

Critics have also taken the Twelve Step groups to task over the past several years for limiting the horizon of their members: in this model, an addict usually identifies her/himself as an addict forever. This should not diminish the groups' accomplishment, however. No other spiritual movement in modern times has communicated to so many people both the necessity of surrender to the divine and the limitation that we all face as part of the human condition.

While it is popular in some circles to view human material possibility as unlimited, in reality we do have limits which are set by our environment. Human material prosperity directly impacts the health and diversity of our ecosystem.

In addition, as we face each other in the Dance circle, we bring all of our family and cultural history with us. The miracle of the Dances initially makes it possible for us to leave this behind for an hour or two, but the more one Dances, the more we are called upon to transform this "family" history, in its larger or smaller context.

And here we face the unique challenge of the Dances. Older forms of meditation called for little interpersonal contact. In sitting across the room from you with my eyes closed, I did not have to include you in my "spiritual experience." The Dances ask us to touch, embrace and move with each other, keeping both the personal and transpersonal dimensions of our beings balanced in the heart. In Murshid Samuel Lewis's visionary revolution of group spiritual practice, you and I are in this together. I am constantly challenged to bring my realization into the deepest aspects of my being, including my touch.

How many of us can say that we have had universally healthy experiences of touch in our lives? No one needs to do a questionnaire on this topic. Daily news reports overwhelm us with the extent of the “addictive” quality of touch in Western culture. Just as we are not educated to touch nature with respect, we don’t have many models for ways to touch each other--or ourselves--with respect.

In this area lies one of the greatest possibilities of the Dances. The heart can hold the feelings of clinging and freedom, abuse and respect, addiction and detachment, sexual passion and unconditional love. The heart that is willing to become wide enough, and which is not afraid to break, can accept all of these feelings and realize that it has a choice. The Dances provide fertile soil for this growth of the heart, if we do not simply settle for a good time.

Both Dance leaders and Dancers who create this soil from the compost of their living experiences can become teachers of healthy touch for all who enter the circle. If we don’t do it, who will?

Of course, this subject also takes us into the area of Dance ethics. This subject often gets sidetracked into talk about judicial due process, authority, law and bureaucracy. Our past history and cultural inheritance also influence our views of these areas. In fact, if the history of every spiritual group of the past two decades teaches us anything, the mere presence of high spiritual ideals does not insure against the abuse of intimacy. Perhaps you begin to see why the Twelve Step groups propose that we surrender to a “higher power.”

In formulating new guidelines for teachers of the Dances, many of us have wrestled with these issues. We have committed ourselves to lifelong education in healthy touch and intimacy, an education that can only take place when we keep our hearts open, against all odds. With all of this in view, the new guidelines try to break through the denial that we are not affected by our personal and cultural karma, but at the same time affirm that we will continue to move toward the most profound realization of our dharma. In part, the new guidelines for teachers read:

“We recognize that we are all, leaders and dancers, affected by the less healthy parts of our culture around issues of money, sex and power. We are all in this together and no one is exempt from these influences of our society. We also recognize that mistakes and accidents happen. In this regard, we will continue our own process of healing and surrendering to the Only Being. At the same time, out of respect for the Dances of Universal Peace, for ourselves and for those who dance with us, we regard ourselves as responsible to act in the most ethical manner possible at all times. We will uphold basic ethical guidelines common to the precepts of all sacred paths and religions.”

In short, there is no separate salvation. We all stand, fall or dance as a circle.

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(September 1996)

## #2 A Tale of Two Villages

In late May, I again found myself bracing against an English downpour as I lashed a pitiful excuse for a rainfly onto my tent at the Peace Through the Arts (PTA) Camp near our home in Dorset. Each year, between three and five hundred people from all over Europe gather together in a rented farmer's field to eat outdoors, live outdoors, plod around through cow dung and dance under several "big top" marquees. Families are welcome and encouraged, and children alone can make up a third of those who gather. An extensive teen program is also now in place.

The camp is also noteworthy for its morning community sessions, during which surfaces everything from needs for blankets, extended "shaggy dog" announcements, complaints, conflicts between genders and age groups, spontaneous clowning and general mayhem. The "facilities" consist of "long-drop" latrines and a wood-burning shower. The first several times I attended, I thought to myself, "People pay money for this? It's hard enough just to be comfortable." Dances of Universal Peace and related practices predominate in the scheduled sessions. But there's also much care taken to gather a community, to leave time for sitting around the fire, telling stories, talking nonsense or just burning off the toes of your Wellington rubber boots.

This year, it was an honor to welcome one of the Sufi teachers who have inspired me greatly: Wali Ali Meyer, one of the original students of Samuel L. Lewis. In helping acclimate Wali Ali to the camp, I found myself saying, "You see, it's really not an ordinary dance camp. It's a dance village that gathers every year."

The PTA village has shared birth and marriage blessings. This year, it also mourned together the passing of our dear friend, Sura Harvey. The strength of a community can be told by the quality of its grieving, and this year our community danced through the tears, not needing to cover or hide them because society tells us they're not acceptable.

In June, Kamae and I joined a second, grieving community for a few days: the residents of Lama Foundation, 90% of which was ravaged by fire in early May. Fortunately, the "heart" of Lama was saved--the old and new kitchen, the main dome, the dewdrop office and the prayer flags. It was miraculous to see a small island of green surrounded by charred land and trees. Burnt grass goes up to the edge of the main dome and somehow around the large wooden pole of prayer flags that welcomes visitors. "When we saw the flags were still flying, we knew we could do this," said Surya, a longtime resident and past coordinator.

Nonetheless, Lama residents lost all of their housing and belongings. And while the land will revive, it will be a very different landscape. While mourning what they've lost, the Lama residents also see this as a way to let the land teach them how to live with it in even more healthy way. They have created a model plan that uses permaculture methods to help the land revive, as opposed to the very unecological methods that the US Forest Service is using all around them.

Reflecting on these two villages, I feel that the crises facing our spiritual communities and organizations have asked us to become more mature and more real very quickly. At the same time, the Dances of Universal Peace have also grown up. We now have Dances that

allow us to grieve together (like the Aramaic Beatitudes and the Rutter Kyrie) and to come into healthy contact with aspects of our beings that were previously “swept under the rug.” In many of the Walks, we’re also exploring the trans-personal and sub-personal aspects of energies like the planets and elements. Like many spiritual practices, the Dances have had to embrace a more full view of what being human really means. Practices that separate light from dark, in a relentless search for an ecstatic “high” have either proven inadequate or abusive, in whatever tradition one looks.

I feel challenged by the words of an ancient oracle, a Middle Eastern gnostic scripture perhaps 3-4000 years old called “Thunder Speaks: Mind that Embraces All Opposites.” This voice of the divine feminine challenges all of our community building, our dance meeting leadership circles, our organizational development and our everyday lives. How we dance and how we live can’t remain separate. This is the voice of our inner self, Sacred Sense, asking us to go beyond our preconceptions of who we think we and “others” are.

“Embrace me from the place in you  
which understands and which grieves,  
from the place which seems ugly and in ruin,  
from the self which steals from its neighbors  
though they are really no better off.

“Advance together to me:  
you who know my unity and disunity,  
the One Self or my separate selves.  
Bring the “great,” the spiritual Self  
to live among the small, the animal selves.

“Advance together to childhood:  
the small, the simple, the poor  
living with  
the great, the complex, the rich.  
Don’t isolate “great” from “small,”  
“rich” from “poor” within you.  
By one you know the other---  
and none can live in health divided.”

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(March 2007)

### #3 Becoming a Lucid Body

In March, I attended and presented at the Association of Humanistic Psychology's Midwest conference, an event co-sponsored by PeaceWorks. At the conference I met one of body-oriented (somatic) researchers whose work I have long admired: Deane Juhan. Juhan authored the ground-breaking book, Job's Body, about ten years ago, which is as important to communicating the "new physics of the body" as Fritjof Capra's Tao of Physics was in relating Eastern mysticism to new directions in Western science.

Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, the founder of the Dances, was also keenly engaged in relating the mysteries of "body" to a larger dimension of social and mystical inquiry. His best work on this subject, Introduction to Spiritual Brotherhood (sic) is sadly out of print currently. In an era when most "spiritual" approaches emphasized escaping the body, Murshid was way ahead of his time.

At the March gathering, Deane Juhan related some of the latest data from the frontiers of the "new physiology." The search for the mind, he said, had begun with a simplistic assumption that to know the brain was all that was necessary. However, as the data has continued to come in, evidence of Mind--memory, information exchange, intelligence--has been found in virtually all structures of the body, down to the level of each individual cell.

Previously, the nucleus of the cell was considered the most important structure. The nucleus floated around in a soup that was considered unimportant, bounded by a wall that kept everything from sloshing out.

However, new data shows that the "soup" contains micro-fibrules, that not only hold things in a particular shape but act as a matrix of communication from one cell to another. The cell wall, far from being unintelligent, actively takes part in deciding what is let in and what goes out. There is communication not only from center to periphery but also in the other direction. The whole model of mind or brain as computer has broken down. The brain is more of a gland than a computer, bathing in and squirting messages through liquid neuro-transmitters, hormones and other substances that flow throughout the body. Muscle, connective tissue and the cell itself is a repository of "mind."

The image of the Dances and Dance leaders again struck me. As I first began to lead, my whole focus was on the burden of my own adequacy or inadequacy as I stood in the center of the circle. My inflation or low self-esteem made it impossible to really sense what was going on in the circle, or to connect with a source of guidance outside myself. As my ego or thought-of-self relaxed (and was sometimes broken by circumstances or my guide), I let go and could get in contact with something that felt like guidance from outside--the spirit of Murshid Samuel Lewis or my teacher.

As I became more confirmed in this experience, I also began to sense more of what was going on in the circle and became more sensitive to shifts in energy and atmosphere. At this point, I receive much more "information" from the circle than I ever transmit. I just focus what I receive and cycle it back transformed through the neuro-transmitter of the

sacred phrase. And in those sublime moments, self, other, phrase, center and circle all express Allah. Ruth St. Denis calls this state, "you and I and the whole dancing universe."

One could say that the test of experienced Dance or Walk teachers is not that they are magnetic personalities or entertainers, but rather that they can become a clearer lens for this flow of energy back and forth from center to circle. Surrender clears the flow for inspiration; ego clogs it up. We need enough healthy "I am" in our subconscious to absorb the diversity we find outside and inside. As Jelaluddin Rumi says about our inner wilderness: "There are also those in this amazing jungle who can absorb you into their own surrender. If you have to stalk and steal something, steal from them!" Knowing the self, one and many, progressively creates a "lucid body."

On a broader level, the ego challenges we go through as Dance leaders or Dancers mirror the evolution of humanity. We humans can evolve from being caught up in our own needs, to opening in surrender, awe and devotion, to realizing our unity with all that is. On a planetary level, we are currently caught between holding on to our illusion of human control and surrendering to the fact that we are making our "circle" of being uninhabitable. We often don't want to hear the messages coming to us from the periphery--the voices of nature, animals and marginal peoples.

So perhaps we Dancers can consciously undertake some of this difficult learning about center and circle, self and relationship, individual and community, on behalf of the whole humanity. With the Buddhists we can say, "May any learning we receive--pleasant or unpleasant--may any blessing created or received, be released for the benefit of all sentient beings. Svaha!"

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(September 1997)

#### **#4 A Vision of Possible Futures**

Last April, I travelled to Brazil to conduct a retreat for teachers of the Dances. This followed up four years of work by Sabira Christina Schkölziger, the primary mentor, and a trip by Tansen O'Donohoe in 1995.

During the trip, I was confronted with a vision of possible futures: one hopeful, one bleak, both co-existing at the same time.

On one hand, our Dance circles in Brazil are the most multi-cultural, multi-racial in the world. The common slogan amongst our friends from the south is: "Who here is not mixed?" A very healthy attitude that could actually be applied anywhere.

Our retreat center was located in a true paradise. We feasted on mangoes, papayas and bananas ripe from the vine, as well as kiwis, acerola, kaki fruit and many varieties I had never seen. Much of the fruit cannot be exported because it is only ripe for two or three days and must be eaten immediately. I remember the birds at dawn celebrating the jungle mists that were evaporated by the sun as it came up over the hills. Nothing I have ever experienced comes so suddenly yet so languidly as the morning in Brazil in the jungle. It is truly an example of the abundance of the earth, a natural paradise.

By contrast, the sun brings death as it rises over the city of Sao Paulo, activating the smog so that it becomes even more poisonous. My eyes began to tear, my throat to constrict within ten minutes of landing. I have been in some very polluted places, but this was shockingly the worst. More homeopathic nux vomica fought back the effects, but the people there live with the effects every day--how?

Or in Rio, the sun rises over individual streets, many with a small kiosk in the middle of the block. Each contains armed private guards, young men in their 20's in military fatigues and boots, wielding submachine guns. They look for anyone unfamiliar or likely to threaten the inhabitants. The guards themselves were the most threatening thing I saw while there. As one of our Rio Dance friends commented, the Roman emperors were usually killed by their guards. The vast disparities of rich and poor in the city make the comparison complete. Like the descriptions of future armed enclaves in Starhawk's book, The Fifth Sacred Thing, the armed enclaves here may represent a possible shadow future, a warning to Western culture that this arming of each street, then each house, is the logical end of greed gone wild.

Back in the jungle hills where we did our retreat, the morning quiet is genuinely peaceful. No guards here. Black, brown, tawny, chocolate, tan, white intermingle. The gifts of Indian, African, Portuguese, and other European ancestry beam from each face as we join hands and say together:

"Em diricao au Uno...." The "Toward the One" invocation in Portuguese.

Then in one of the Indian languages the same phrase is sung; prayers can only be sung in this language, never said:

"A Juhavaiti Petei...."

Like many languages, the invocation does not translate directly, but the same heart feeling is there, the same sense of linking up with the circles worldwide. The root energy of this particular earth, too, courses into our feet as we are ready again for the dance. This unique spirit also enriches our circles, acting as a new lens for broadcasting the spirit of universal peace further.

There is much we can learn from our newest circles in Brazil and the rest of South America. Particularly for North America, there may be lessons of possible futures, both positive and negative. As we near the millenium, the movement towards both possibilities seems to accelerate. As the "center" of culture becomes more bleak, the "periphery" seems to hold more and more promise. Like the forces scientists have explained by "chaos theory"--the clouds, winds and waves--large scale changes gather at the "edge," almost unnoticed or unobservable, then quickly take over.

There is no room for complacency in our circles, but at the same time there is no reason for despair. When we dance "universal peace" we are dancing a peace beyond concepts, beyond cultishness, beyond self-satisfaction. This may create a large gap between our ideals and where we--or our respective cultures--exist. But our Brazilian friends taught me again that remarkable obstacles bring out truly remarkable joy and thankfulness for and in life. And this joy and thankfulness fills a very large gap.

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(March 1998)

## **#5 On the Challenges of Brotherhood and Sisterhood**

In February, I accepted a new position in one of the organizations associated with my own spiritual lineage, Sufism. The position asks me to give spiritual guidance regarding the work of making the Sufi Message practical and useful to the general public. In the organizational structures that Hazrat Inayat Khan began, this is now called the sister/brotherhood or kinship work.

The origins of this terminology can be found in the sayings of Muhammad, as well as the writings of the classical Sufi mystic Al-Ghazali. For instance, a saying of the Prophet Muhammad expresses one aspect of this ethic simply but profoundly:

“Two brothers are likened to a pair of hands, one of which washed the other.”

Hazrat Inayat Khan also writes extensively about ethics and moral culture as well as sister/brotherhood. In the realm of moral culture, Inayat Khan defines three types, or grades of relationship: reciprocity--giving as one receives; renunciation--giving up the needs of the ego for another, and beneficence--a condition of radiant service in which the ego disappears in Only Being. Here one can see parallels to the Saying of Muhammad mentioned earlier.

Inayat Khan also defines sister/brotherhood on a much larger scale than simply relating to one's own brothers and sisters in faith:

“The world, the nation, the family can be pictured as one single body and when one part of the body has pain although the other part has no pain, the person feels sick. Therefore you can never be happy unless you see your brother and your neighbor happy also. But very few people think this way....”

Today this idealized ethic of planetary unity is now embraced by many organizations and individuals. Yet just having high ideals is not enough, otherwise we would already have a much different world than the one in which we live. There are many subtle dimensions in working with such ideals, which we ignore at the peril of becoming the sort of religious or organizational orthodoxy that most of rebelled against. As I formally accepted this position, I tried to articulate some of these subtleties. They also deeply affect our work with the Dances of Universal Peace and for this reason, I've quoted most of these remarks below:

“At the outset, I am reminded of a story told me by one of Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan's companions, Shamcher Beorse, whom I was privileged to help for several years back in the late 70's. Shamcher related that someone asked Hazrat Inayat Khan why, if he had so many problems with organization, he still chose to bother with one. He answered, 'To meet more people.'”

“No doubt, much of our work in the Sister/Brotherhood is related to the very practical details of spreading the word about our Sufi classes, the books of Hazrat Inayat Khan, and the way of the Message that he articulated. This involves a certain amount of producing newsletters and brochures, sponsoring speakers and evenings, licking stamps and stuffing envelopes. Nothing can go on without this level of commitment on the earth plane.”

“On another level, many of us are involved in articulating the Message in other spheres where it interacts with the voice(s) of our surrounding culture: through writing articles or books, teaching in the school or university, speaking at conferences and symposia, writing letters, or making connections with organizations who could be allies. In this sphere we are not necessarily looking for someone to join us or support our organization, but we are offering spiritual food to a spiritually starving culture. As one cannot expect table manners from a starving person, so we must meet the people we do without conceptions or expectations.

“In addition, we each carry our atmosphere wherever we go and whomever we meet. If we trust that ultimately the Message is wordless, and each of us conveys it through the breath, as and when we remember, we are also doing the work of Brother/Sisterhood. Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, in his paper on the ‘Bestowing of Blessing’ wrote that it will be the work of the initiates in the coming era to spread baraka-magnetism wherever they go, without expecting the thanks, acknowledgment or even the notice of those around them. In the words of Hazrat Inayat Khan's prayer, ‘A new hope is born in my heart by breathing thy peaceful atmosphere.’ In this sphere, the ‘exoteric’ work of Sister/Brotherhood becomes most ‘esoteric,’ and in fact the difference disappears.

“I would hope that we can support each other on all of these levels of our work, and I dedicate myself to finding new ways to make this a reality.

“At the same time, we must face the fact that all organizational structures, especially those dedicated to high ideals, have a shadow side. Because our ideals, and those of our teachers like Hazrat Inayat Khan, are so high, there is a large gap between where we are and where we want to be. How do we measure how effective we are in relation to affecting the surrounding culture in a positive way?

“When we have no way to measure this, the temptation is to let the addictive patterns of organizational busy-ness fill in the gap. Under these circumstances, goals become more important than process, productivity more valued than people. These are patterns we see all around us in our culture and they are easy for us to fall into as well. All of our collective organizational histories are full of examples of things that we would rather do a different way, if we had the chance. To rehash the details is worse than useless. It distracts us from our own part in these patterns, which ultimately are the promptings of our subconscious selves, trying to get our attention.

“Normally, what happens when we come up against these subconscious organizational patterns is a process of denial, like the story told by the late Jesuit mystic, Fr. Anthony DeMello:

“After the war, a man is sitting on a London bus with a large parcel wrapped in brown paper. The bus conductor comes up to him and says, ‘What do you have on our lap there?’ The man says, ‘This is an unexploded bomb. We dug it out of the garden and I'm taking it to the police station.’ The conductor says, ‘You don't want to carry that on your lap. Put it under the seat.’

“Staying open to our own imperfection, our own growing process, our own inner subconscious voices is a good antidote for taking ourselves too seriously, or thinking we've arrived somewhere no one else has been or can go. At the same time, it allows more

of our whole self to participate in our work together. We meet more people, as it were, outside and inside."

(Autumn 1998)

## **#6 On Mentoring and Healthy Relationship**

In August, the MTG held its second North American camp, this time at Camp Miminagish in Montana. The main focus of the camp were leadership and mentoring skills, specifically aimed at mentors. Along with the experience of Dance and Walk, many issues of interest to all who love the Dances of Universal Peace were taken up with love and respect.

While it be obvious, the experience of Dance mentoring for the first decade has been that, while a particular person may be a very good Dance leader, this does not necessarily mean that s/he will be a good mentor. In particular, those without one-to-one skills in some other context, for instance, spiritual guidance or therapy, often struggle with the limitations of the Dance mentoring relationship.

In spiritual guidance, a relationship is negotiated between teacher and student that focuses on the student's overall spiritual growth and development, something that can be a lifelong process. In psychotherapy, the goal of relationship may be either short or long-term, depending on what the client presents as the issue or problem to be worked through. In Dances of Universal Peace mentoring, the goal of Dance/Walk certification presents an immediate focus, yet in the process of working toward that goal, issues common in one of the other two relationships, spiritual guidance or therapy, may arise.

From supervising many Dance mentors over the past ten years, it seems clear to me that if a mentor does not know the boundaries of these different types of relationship, then difficulties will arise. And the only way to know them is by experience. If mentors do not have an active spiritual guidance relationship, how can they know when to refer their mentees to their own spiritual guides when "spiritual emergency" issues arise? Likewise, if mentors have not pursued their own inner clearing through some form of therapy, how can they know when to refer a mentee for work on these areas of self/soul development?

Of course, a number of us wear several different "hats" in relation to our mentees: we may be both mentors and spiritual guides. Mostly, these "double relationships" work well; if a person takes up Dance leading as part of their personal spiritual guidance process, both relationships can be strengthened.

It is instead the mentor who has a distant or non-active relationship with a spiritual guide, who has never really experienced (or allowed her/himself to experience) an active relationship of transmission, either in the Dances or in a spiritual path, who cannot seem to pass this on successfully to others. In these cases, the more superficial elements of the Dances are passed on without a sense of the power of the inner transmission. These types of situations weaken the overall respect for the transmission of the Dances through our ancestors, as well as weaken the actual presentation of the Dances. More and more derivative Dances tend to be done, relying on the imitation of the music and/or movements of other Dances.

Further, we do not, in Western culture, have very good models for fostering healthy relationships in either mentoring or in our organizational life. We are, along with other spiritual transmissions, trying to preserve the best from the past while creating new

models of personal spiritual transmission that will take us into the future in healthy, non-abusive ways.

The MTG gathering in Montana discussed these and many related issues. We also discussed and experienced the resources we have and the models that have worked. On the experience side, we focused on the original Dances of Murshid Samuel Lewis and the way in which they teach the ability to focus energy, both for Dance leaders and for new Dance creation. They also give us the opportunity to experience Murshid Samuel Lewis' magnetism directly and allow our own souls to come into relationship with it. We also spent time with the Walks (and hope to do more next year) and the way in which they offer tools to help mentees develop certain qualities that balance elements of personality (and trans-personality) in an alchemical sense. Without a firm mastery of the Walks, and a confidence in assigning them to mentees, a mentor really has little to work with.

We also discussed various models of adult education that call on mentor and mentee to set up a "learning contract" that details a) a learning curriculum (what is to be learned); b) how it will be learned; c) how this learning will be demonstrated to the mentor and d) how it will be evaluated. At a certain stage of a mentee's development, setting clear goals, and methods of self-evaluation, are very important. But to reiterate a point, a mentee cannot learn to trust their own inner guidance (as opposed to their ego) if they have never really experienced surrendering ego to guidance in a person outside themselves. Basic trust and respect between mentor and mentee are essential.

None of these are easy issues. But I came away from this year's MTG gathering feeling grateful to the certified teachers and mentors who chose to attend for their willingness to work together towards clarity. Such gatherings are more than just "dance deepening," and the level at which we were able to attune, meditate, Dance and Walk our talk together was truly inspiring.

It was my greatest joy to share this gathering with Tasnim Fernandez, who more than anyone else helped found and focus the Dances of Universal Peace certification and mentoring system.

Next years' MTG gathering will again be open to all mentors, certified teachers and those in supervision for a substantial period of time. It will be held in the Northeast of North America from August 17-23 and details will be found elsewhere in this issue.

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(Spring 1999)

## #7 Dancing at the Dargah of Hazrat Inayat Khan

In February I had the opportunity, after 20 years' absence, to visit the gravesite of Sufi Pir-o-Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan in New Delhi. It was Inayat Khan's vision of the Unity of Religious Ideals that provided Murshid Samuel Lewis with the major inspiration for the Dances of Universal Peace. While Samuel Lewis followed both a Zen and Sufi path for most of his adult life, he always called Hazrat Inayat Khan the "teacher of his heart" and the later rightly takes an honored place in the story of the ancestors of the Dances.

When I visited 20 years ago, the gravesite (or maqbara) was difficult to find and few locals knew where it was. We threaded our way down a narrow alley in the Nizamuddin district in order to enter a small enclosure not much larger than the grave itself. The atmosphere pervaded peace, and as a young student on the Sufi path, I felt a strong connection to the being of Inayat Khan.

Twenty years later, the atmosphere of the maqbara remains as powerful as ever. In addition, the complex around it has been remodeled and beautified through the vision, fund-raising and hard work of the mureeds of the Sufi Movement. According to Indian thinking, a great Sufi could not have a poor maqbara, so these developments have also made the maqbara a center of pride for the Nizamuddin village. Now most local people we met knew where the dargah was located.

This year marked the opening of a new meditation hall, classrooms and offices next to the gravesite itself. A music school, supported by local experts in Indian classical music, will train young people in traditional musical styles and techniques, which are literally dying under the barrage of Western globalization and, to use the word loosely, culture. In this sense, the maqbara complex and school will help keep alive the spiritual arts of music which Hazrat Inayat Khan held so dear and which provided the examples for his teachings on the mysticism of sound. The Hope Project of the Sufi Order International, along with a tandem educational/service project of the Sufi Movement also provide early childhood education and craft training/job development for local women.

In reflecting upon the developments at the dargah, I felt that the original atmosphere of blessing remained the same, yet the new growth served to focus or magnify what was already there. It was as though, over 20 years, an accommodation had been created for more people to experience and benefit directly from the physical magnetism that the grave of a Sufi saint carries. During the first retreat held at the new complex, I was also privileged to lead the Dances of Universal Peace and Walking Meditations of Murshid Samuel Lewis and was joined by mureeds of the Sufi Movement, Sufi Order and the Sufi Islamia Ruhaniat Society, the major streams of the esoteric work that Hazrat Inayat Khan began. Literally, some new "movement" had come to the maqbara complex which promised increased cooperation for this work in the future.

I also reflected on Hazrat Inayat Khan's perception that all visions, all new creations proceed from an inner impulse in the One Being, from what he calls the "Silent Life." The creation then gathers in frequency of vibration as it proceeds to express itself more and more on the surface of life. For instance, a feeling usually proceeds through thought to word or action. The word is only a shadow of the thought or feeling. The new developments at the dargah also proceeded over time expressing themselves gradually on

the surface of life, until they have now become a beacon of hope and inspiration for the whole district in which they reside.

As I watch the development of the Dances of Universal Peace, I also see this progression from the Silent Life to, increasingly, the expression of life on the surface: more Dances, more traditions, more applications, more recordings, more organization(s). This natural development reflects the vitality of the original vision. As the original creative impulse proceeds, it is also easy to get “lost in the details” and fail to reconnect with the original Silent Life behind it all. The Dances are only one symbolic expression in a world consciousness yearning for movement toward real peace. As Murshid Samuel Lewis said, “Excitement is the death of peace.” In our age, we might add that “entertainment is the death of peace.”

In this regard, I feel the most important goal of all leaders of the Dances should be not learning more Dances, but rather the continued cultivation of their own spiritual development. The greatest goal of any organization devoted to the Dances should not be the unverifiable and unrealistic task of making them available to everyone in the world. Such a goal only leads to a huge gap between ideal and reality, which is the stuff from which addictive patterns spring. In addition, there are many other ways for people to express this yearning for deep peace. Instead, I believe that our organizations--regional, national and international--should seek to provide for all those people who do share in Dances the greatest experience of real love, joy and peace. It doesn't matter how many people find entertainment. There are many ways to be entertained. But every person who changes deeply, and discovers her or his own true nature, adds immeasurably to the peace of the world.

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(September 1999)

## **#8 On the Dances, Their Strengths and Changes, part I**

When can I change the movements of a Dance of Universal Peace?  
Are there different types and "strengths" of Dances?  
And who decides when a dance is a "Dance of Universal Peace"?

These are some of the questions that beginning (and advanced) leaders of the Dances often ask. About seven years ago I began writing down a series of musings on these questions, from my own personal experience of bringing through about 60 Dances of Universal Peace over the past 20 years. These observations are also based on seeing countless new Dances being tried out, as well as many variations and unconscious changes.

These words are not meant to promote a "policy" or orthodoxy, but rather to help you deepen in your own experience. Sometimes this deepening involves asking the questions: "What am I really doing here, and why am I doing it?" With regards to making "policy" on these questions, I believe that bureaucracy presents a much greater threat to a living spiritual transmission than hierarchy. For this reason, the language I'm using is deliberately philosophical rather than bureaucratic.

These are the types of questions that arise in the Mentor Teachers Guild, an expanding group of certified teachers who are focusing their work on keeping the Dances of Universal Peace alive for coming generations. Like the Native American saying, we try to look ahead "seven generations" to see how we can nurture and invigorate the Dances so that we hand over something living, creative and powerful to our children.

Because a bit of groundwork needs to be laid, this column is a bit longer than usual, and will be continued in the next issue. To start from the beginning, here is the often-quoted passage written by Murshid Samuel L. Lewis in a paper called "Spiritual Dancing" (which appeared in an earlier edition of the Teachers Dance Manual):

"Spiritual Dancing is that which elevates the consciousness. Dancing may be said to be the movement of the body or any of its parts to rhythm, and spiritual is that which helps to make one realize that this body is really the Divine Temple. Therefore the use of sacred phrases and words, or the practice of deep meditation before starting, is necessary. For no dance is a Spiritual Dance because it is called that. It does not mean a certain form or technique, nor a ritual, nor something so esoteric that there is no understanding by performers and no communication to audience...

"It may be questioned whether or not these are folk dances. Of course they are folk dances. There have been groups like Dervishes and even Shaking Quakers, who used dance forms. The Bible has much to say on this and traditional religion very little. The development of ecstasy has always been regarded as beneficial to the young, to help them rise above the denseness of earth. If not shown "right ways," youth will take to "other ways." This is the nature of youth.



"It may also be asked if this is a rigid form, or able to be used as the basis for modulation and improvisation. What must remain is the sacred phrase; this, the sacred phrase, and not the form, is the foundation of development along this line."

1. VARIATIONS: Devotion and pristine attunement with transparent ego will transmit an experience beyond small variations of form. Certain Dances (like the Kalama of Murshid Samuel L. Lewis) are so strong in the cosmos, however, that any major changes (like stepping in on "La illaha" and out on "el Allah hu") will feel like a violation. I would also question the motivation / intention of someone who cares so little about such a Dance that s/he does not spend enough time getting to know it.

2. UNCONSCIOUS CHANGES: When comparing an original, time-tested Dance with a version of it containing an unconscious or semi-conscious change, the changed version always seems to "leak energy" to me. Because the movement is not defined and clear, it does not hold the feeling generated by the sacred phrase as well. It is as though the leader (and Dance) is "sleepwalking." Again, if the person leading such a Dance is in some special state of consciousness (which the Sufis call hal), any amount of grace may pop through. This is what the famous story about the dervish chanting Sufi zikr backwards and then walking on water is about. However, I often find that this story is told with an attitude of self-justification and self-satisfaction. It's a little like saying that just because falling in love is always possible, infidelity is always justified.

3. SACRED PHRASES: Not all sacred phrases are equal and none are alike. Phrases like Allah, Ramnam (Taraka Mantra), Ave Maria, Abwoon d'bashmaya--by use and longevity--are simple and effective. These are the heart of "Foundation Dances," the basic repertoire that all long-time (more than 10-year) Dance leaders have developed.

Murshid Wali Ali has pointed out that some words become sacred phrases because of who said them: like the utterance of "Wah" by Guru Nanak of the Sikhs. We do Dances with sacred phrases in English by Hazrat Inayat Khan, Murshid Samuel Lewis and Ruth St. Denis. To me, these Dances are more about the practice of effacement in those beings (the Sufi word for which practice is tassawuri) than about mantra and the mysticism of sound. Devotion and attunement are essential if such Dances are to express anything more than superficial emotion or pleasant sentiment. Perhaps at some point, these phrases, by their repetition with devotion by countless souls, will become mantras like those above. Paradoxically, I have found that non-English speakers often access the mantric dimension of sacred phrases in English (for instance, by Hazrat Inayat Khan) more quickly than do native English speakers. Their minds are not immediately jumping in with sentimentality, and this leaves more room for the real heart connection to develop.

4. ENGLISH SACRED PHRASES. Then, there are the "hymn Dances" and other English language Dances which may or may not connect to a particular tradition. We sometimes call the latter, "personal poetry dances," and it is often questionable whether, according to Murshid Samuel Lewis' definition above, these are Dances of Universal Peace at all. One might ask, does the fact that a fire-and-brimstone Christian hymn has a long track record make it more "sacred" than a "new age" song, the theology of which is much more to our liking? For me, this whole question has to do with which community or path a particular phrase accesses. I can foresee that genuine sacred phrases may arise which connect the neo-pagan community (for instance, words of Starhawk or Z. Budapest). But again, time and usage will tell. The issue for the Dances and our leadership is how much of our

energy we want to invest in such Dances when there are many, old sacred mantric phrases waiting to be used, like the Sumerian Goddess phrase "Ama Usum Gal Ana." A Dance like this--which was the first of the so-called "Native Middle Eastern Dances"--spreads almost effortlessly worldwide because it relies on a simple, powerful sacred phrase with original music and movements that like a clear lens help focus that power.

5. VARIATIONS AND MELODIES: In some traditions, ancient sacred phrases often come with ancient melodies attached, and these may generate many different Dances and variations. For instance, Om Nama Shivaya and Ram Nam have generated several powerful Dances. In these cases, the greater the difference in the variation, the more it helps us to feel the mantra in a broader or deeper way. Small variations are usually insignificant in these cases, because the mantra-with-music combination is so old and powerful.

On the other hand, when someone focuses on a sacred phrase in meditation, and a new melody and movements come specifically for a Dance of Universal Peace, that combination becomes, for me, more linked in the akasha (or unseen sphere of impressions--what scientist Rupert Sheldrake now calls the Morphogenetic Field). It is much harder to change such a Dance successfully without its energy "leaking." Good examples are again the Kalama or Abwoon d'bashmaya.

This seems even more true with a Dance in English, which uses, for instance, a phrase in translation from Hildegard of Bingen or Hazrat Inayat Khan. Here, because the mantric-sound effect is not strong, the container for feeling is much more fragile and dependent on the music and movements. While being fragile, however, such a Dance may invite us into a portion of the "universe of feeling" (as Wali Ali has put it) which no other Dance can or does.

To be continued in the next issue of "We Circle Around."

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(Spring 2000)

## **#9 On the Dances, Their Strengths and Changes, part II**

This column continues one in the last issue of *We Circle Around*, in which I considered the following questions: When can I change the movements of a Dance of Universal Peace? Are there different types and “strengths” of Dances? And who decides when a dance is a “Dance of Universal Peace”?

In the previous column, I discussed in a broader, philosophical way, the original nature and purpose of the Dances, as well as how they hold and transmit energy as spiritual practices. I'll continue here from a more concrete point of view, starting with the last question above.

Generally speaking, a Dance becomes recognized “officially” as a Dance of Universal Peace when it is archived or published in some way. According to the guidelines of the Mentor Teachers Guild (MTG) and the INDUP, every recording or publication of Dances of Universal Peace is supervised by a Mentor. Even given this, we have in the past published Dances that, given the considerations I wrote about last time, may be on the fringes of the definition of a Dance of Universal Peace, that is, they may not be centred on a sacred phrase with any real lineage. In most cases, this inclusion was based on a simple, and I believe, practical idea: “Let's see what happens to this Dance—maybe it will have a life of its own.” As Murshid Samuel Lewis once wrote, “to formulate the New Age is to restrict the New Age...visions which crystallize are incomplete.”

The question of archiving is more complex. Practically speaking, everyone involved in the DUP work has limited time for organizational matters, as the center of our work is sharing the Dances. It has never been a practical objective, for either the INDUP or the MTG to collect all usable Dances.

We rely on the integrity and sincerity of individual Dance leaders to nurture their own new Dances and write them up if they felt this desirable. We do not now, and have never had, either the volunteer or paid energy available to provide an “on-call” Dance archive of all Dances--old, new and in process.

The INDUP and MTG were originally founded on the basis of the idea of “distributed networks.” This means that the Dances spread and are nurtured through locally based relationships (like the MTG and Mentoring) and communities (like the RegNet -INDUP system).

Even if we could archive every Dance of Universal Peace in the known universe, the question remains, would we want to? I would say: probably not.

For one thing, what we can archive is not the Dance, but rather a written description of it. This is an important difference. The best (and some would say, the only) way to learn a Dance is not from a description. If a person does not know a Dance well enough in his/her body, feeling and spirit to share it, then it's not time for her/him to lead it. This may sound harsh, but I firmly believe that no one “needs” a particular Dance in a particular situation. If the memory does not supply it, then the whole being is not in cooperation enough to share it. It's not a new or trendy Dance that I need to access in a specific situation, but rather a deeper attunement to the Dances I already know.

But what about the beginning leader? We were all beginning leaders originally. If we create a "dial-up" Dance service, or the expectation of one, then we will weaken the oral tradition of the Dances, which is our main resources. In this sense, the only real archive for a given Dance are the people who know the Dance in their whole being, including the originator. If the originator is able to transmit the Dance, even if only to one other person who keeps it going, then the Dance is "archived" for the future.

Written descriptions are also problematic from another standpoint. Few of our descriptions are so complete that one can determine where every footstep and gesture are at any point in time. The new booklet of Murshid Samuel Lewis's best Dances is the most complete in this regard. There is a great level of detail required even for these relatively simple Dances. I have not even begun to write up Kamae and my Native Middle Eastern Dances for the reason that verbal descriptions of the movements are virtually impossible. For the past five years, we have been experimenting with a solely oral approach to these Dances, and the results are encouraging. People watch more closely, try to experience the movement more deeply (or at least enough leaders do so to teach them in faithfulness).

Third, there is an obvious difference in quality in Dances. Sometimes only time can show us this quality difference, and our published tapes evidence the fact that what looks wonderful at one time proves to be a passing flower some years later. This is the nature of our Dances.

So what should we be archiving, and when, and how? Given finite energy and time, I believe we should archive Dances according to a priority I outline below, which is based on some of the considerations in the previous column. I've given examples from my own Dances, so as not to embarrass anyone else with regard to Dances that were less than fully formed.

1) **Mantric foundation Dances** with inspired and original music and movements. By "mantric" I mean non-vernacular, non-English sacred phrases with a clear, direct relationship to a spiritual tradition or prophetic/mystical voice. By "inspired and original" I mean music and movements generated from a deep meditation on the mantra, in the tradition of Murshid Samuel Lewis, which allow the mantra to be focused in a clear, powerful way. The music and movements are intuitive, that is, they do not "act out," in a mental way, concepts expressed in the phrase but allow access to the depth of the phrase and the door it opens onto the tradition or sacred being. As well as being inspired, the movements are perfectly in tune with the tradition of gesture in a particular spiritual community. Example: Abwoon d'bashmaya.

2) **Mantric foundation Dances with non-original, traditional music and original movements** (and variations. There could be any number of movement variations for these phrases (see previous column), but the strongest will be original, intuitive and tradition-based, as above. Examples: Om Nama Shivaya or any number of Ram Nam Dances.

3) **Mantric foundation Dances with original music and derivative movements.** By "derivative," I mean movements which, either consciously or unconsciously, are copied from those of another Dance and which do not fit the new Dance, either somatically or spiritually. Usually, these Dances simply weren't allowed to cook long enough and were archived and published too soon. Examples: the first version of the Zoroastrian Humata Hukhata Dance (published in DUP #3) or the Ram Nam Square Dance. From my own

experience with the Zoroastrian Dance , it can take many years to re-vision movements for a Dance that was "born too soon."

4) Other variations of 3): mantric dances with derivative music, and/or imitative of other Dances in music, movement and sometimes even phrase. If the music is derivative, it's unlikely that the movements will be original--not impossible but unlikely. These are usually products of the mind more than the heart. Perhaps there was too much need for approval mixed in with a sincere desire to bring something through. I would not archive these dances at all. Example: Pust Sveгда (Russian Children's Peace Dance on DUP #4).

Using the same four point scheme, one could look at two other categories of Dances in the same way:

A) **Hybrid dances**, which combine a mantric phrase and a vernacular (usually English) phrase. Example: the hybrid (first published) version of the Zoroastrian Sun Dance. These are worth archiving in decreasing importance, as in #1-4 above.

B) **Vernacular Dances**, usually English sacred phrases (although the Germans and Russians have some, too). Example: Seed of God. In decreasing importance as above. Often these Dances are important for certain regions, or for certain periods of time. This doesn't mean that these Dances are unimportant, but that it is not the best use of archiving to spend a lot of energy collecting them. The ones that are worth archiving will be around after about a decade, and by then the strongest variations will have sorted themselves out.

An extenuating circumstance for archiving either a hybrid or vernacular Dance would be that it uses a phrase of Murshid Samuel Lewis, Ruth St. Denis or Hazrat Inayat Khan, because of their special relationship to our lineage. But I still wouldn't archive any #4 Dance (that is, with derivative music) because of this.

Sometimes a Dance is a mixture of #1-3. Personally, I like to see all new Dances be as strong as possible before being released, and I try to encourage originators, if they are open to this feedback, not to rush a Dance "into production" simply to satisfy their own or their circle's desire for newness. Not everyone is open to this type of feedback, even though the mentoring relationship is intended to foster the level of trust needed for it. So I see a lot of new Dances that are only "half-baked" and will probably remain that way until they fade away or are re-visioned by their creators.

From the MTG's standpoint, I think we could ask all mentors in a position to see new Dances to encourage originators to write up a Dance, if and when they think it's finished, and send it to the archivist. Occasionally, just to keep us honest, the Universe will send a brilliant new Dance through someone with little or no formal training. We just have to all keep our eyes and ears open for this.

Networking with lineage holders of and advisers in various, especially indigenous traditions is also a worthy project. Really, this should be a separate function within the MTG and INDUP, like archiving. Practically speaking, this work goes on at the grass roots level, for instance in Brazil, Canada and Russia, to name a few places I know of.

Also, Radha Buko's "3D training" model is an example of teaching leaders an attunement to various traditions, by actually situating the training at, for instance, a Hindu ashram, Buddhist center, etc. and inviting resident teachers to share from the heart of the tradition.

The more these types of models develop, the closer we will be to building a multi-spiritual/cultural MTG, in an authentic way.

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(Autumn 2000)

## **#10 Writing Down the Blood: The Living Transcription of an Oral Transmission**

(The following column is taken from the introductory material of the new Foundation Manual for teachers of the Dances of Universal Peace compiled by Radha Tereska Buko and due to be released shortly. It was entitled "Writing Down the Blood: The Living Transcription of an Oral Transmission.")

In the beginning was the Word.... Or rather, the living experience of a teacher. The first disciples of Murshid Samuel L. Lewis were showered with the living baraka (or blessing-magnetism) of a mystic who had had a lifetime of spiritual training. They imbibed this baraka and, for many of them, it changed their lives. They weren't making notes on his footsteps. Descriptions of the Dances from this period are sketchy at best; which foot began a dance or exactly how hands were held was considered unimportant.

When those of us in the "second generation" came around, a few years after Murshid's passing (in 1971), we found his early disciples carrying on, to the best of their capacity, Murshid's emphasis on feeling, experience and magnetism. Less than a dozen Dances of Universal Peace were available in public notation (these in an early edition of the booklet Spiritual Dance and Walk). The "Teacher's Manual" was only available to certified teachers of the Dances, and certification was limited to initiates in Sufism, in almost all cases, to those directly linked with the transmission of Murshid Samuel Lewis. Those of us who began to come to public Dances were simply instructed to "watch the leader's feet and don't sing louder than the leader." This was all. Even after becoming initiated into Sufism, and attending the Advanced Saturday Night Class at the Mentorgarten in San Francisco, one received no hand-outs or "learning aids." Notating Dances for oneself was frowned upon and one was encouraged to experience a Dance until it became second nature.

At this time, there were probably fewer than 50 Dances that were widely done. Although between 50 to 60 early Dances of Murshid Samuel Lewis himself exist in preliminary notation, many of these Dances were still works in progress when he passed. Fewer than 20 of his original Dances were done widely by any of this original mureeds at the time that this person entered the circle in 1976. The first full compilation of a Teachers Dance Manual had been done in 1975 by Khalifa Amina Erickson. Other files in the Mentorgarten contain fragmentary write-ups of early Dances and Walks, but this first edition, on which several of Murshid Samuel Lewis's original mureeds worked, marked a watershed in the transmission of the Dances.

To digress briefly, several researchers in cross-cultural anthropology and religious studies have made studies into what seems to happen when an oral transmission become written. Some tendencies noted include the following. When a spiritual practice ceases to enter memory directly and becomes mediated by a "text" (especially a written text), the emphasis on experience lessens in favor of an emphasis on the conceptual (mental) aspect of the practice (Coward, 1988). When the oral recitation and re-telling of a religious figures words give way to written notation of them, the process is never objective, and various "editions" tend to serve various interests, often subconsciously so (see, for instance, Kelber, 1997 regarding the transmission of the canonical Gospels).

From my experience of coming to the Dances of Universal Peace, a significant portion of the original mureeds of Murshid Samuel L. Lewis either believed that no significant new

Dances would arise after him, or that any which did would be the products of his direct mureeds. At the same time, most of these mureeds still lived in the San Francisco Bay area, and consequently most new work in Dance and Walk tended to be centered in this area.

Around 1978, however, Murshid Wali Ali Meyer, who led the Saturday Advanced Dance Class at the Mentorgarten, consciously set out an intention to us that, by the grace of the One, new Dances would begin to and through mureeds from the same "akashic" source as did those of Murshid Samuel Lewis. This in fact began to happen. By 1980, there were enough new (primarily mantric) Dances to re-compile the Teachers Manual. The new Dances were added as a supplement, and again with the permission and encouragement of Murshids Moineddin and Wali Ali, a public booklet of these new Dances was released. This is the booklet/ tape collection now called Dances of Universal Peace, Volume Two. (The "volume one" collection actually happened later, and was a re-working of the the "Sufi Song and Dance album" produced by the Sufi Choir.

As more people began to come to the annual Mendocino (California) Camps for Dance and Walk training, the reasoning behind this, as well as the more broad distribution of the Teacher's Dance Manual was the following: if we don't give learners the best descriptions we have available, and if many are so far flung that it is unlikely they will be able to come to California for training, then we cannot blame them for transmuting the Dances into something unrecognizable. In the background of this decision was the context that something like this transmogrification of the Dances had already happened when, after his passing, two early mureeds of Murshid Samuel Lewis joined Bhagwan Rajneesh, and the somewhat bizarre form of "Sufi Dancing" done by that group attained popularity.

Having been involved with the transmission of several new Dances, and with some editing skills, I ended up in charge of both projects: the new Teachers Dance Manual (TDM) and the distribution of the public booklet/ tape. In 1979, Kamae A Miller and I also began a concentration called "Sufi Islamia Ruhaniat Society Publications," which sought to produce more of Murshid Samuel Lewis' writings in book form. As part of the distribution of the new TDM, I sent a questionnaire to every known practitioner of the Dances, anywhere in the world, informed them of the manual and invited them to make contact. From this opening, we ended up sending the TDM to several countries (like England and New Zealand) where there were no known Dance leaders, but rather in trust of Sufi teachers who were interested in the Dances and promised to pass along the manual to a student when they intuitively felt it appropriate. In the ensuing 20 years, I have often heard stories about how these early manuals passed from hand to hand until they found their way to someone who was seriously guided to the work.

Again, if we look at cross-cultural studies of oral transmission, we often find, at a certain stage of growth ( and perhaps repeatedly at critical moments) one of two trends (and sometimes a combination): either a return to "orthodoxy" (with its attendant sense of "keeping the transmission pure") and/or a further "broadcasting" of the work (like scattering seeds) with a lessening of restriction accompanied by the prayer that the "seed" will find "good soil."

The Dance and Walk transmission of Murshid Samuel Lewis has been through this process several times in its brief history. As more Dances arose, the need to notate them increased, even while winnowing out those that seemed ephemeral. As more people began to Dance in many more places, the notation and publication of Dances served as a way to communicate with others (beyond the actual content communicated).



This process received a boost in 1982, when as a result of a spiritual retreat supervised by Murshids Wali Ali and Moineddin, this person was moved to begin the “Center for the Study of Spiritual Dance and Walk” (later the Center for the Dances of Universal Peace). The vision of the Center was simple: to allow the Dances and Walks to spread--through direct, experiential training-- beyond the confines of the Sufi inner school, that is, to train non-mureeds as Dance leaders. In this project I was joined very early by both Sheikha Tasnim Fernandez of the Sufi Order International as well as Murshida Kamae. The publication of more booklets and tapes followed from this, as well as the creation of events called “Dances of Univesal Peace camps” and training camps.

With the publication of this new “Foundation Dance Manual” we are now at another cusp in the transmission (and notation of) the Dances and Walks of Murshid Samuel Lewis. On the side of the Dances, there may seem to be a conservative trend in the designation of certain Dances as “foundational” as well as the degree of exactitude to which they are notated. However, it is also a tool for outreach and “seeding” The translation of a limited body of descriptions of excellent mantric Dances into non-English languages, for the training of the increasing numbers of Dance leaders outside of English-speaking countries, will help the work spread as nothing else can.

We can, if you will, regard this collection of Dances not as an orthodoxy, but as a “seed bank” of original varieties that have stood the test of time and which seem motivated by the same clear, visionary sense as motivated the original Dances of Murshid Samuel Lewis: the repetition of a mantric, sacred phrase with devotion. Not surprisingly, almost a third of this first “foundation” collection are Dances of Murshid Samuel Lewis himself.

I do believe that increasingly detailed and “user-friendly” written teaching materials lessen the tendency for students to learn with their whole bodies, hearts and souls, that is, to use capabilities that they did not previously know they had. The “transmission-style” of learning is the real learning of the Dances as a spiritual practice rather than as a form of performance art, even in the name of community building. Spiritual practice urges us to look within and go beyond who we thought we were. It does not encourage a sense of mutual self-congratulation or self-satisfaction: “We are the New Age, and you’re not.”

We also cannot overlook the trend that those who are more capable in written learning (and who have the resources to promote themselves) can tend to control the agenda of a spiritual transmission, often to the undoing of the intentions of the founder of that transmission. We need again only look as far the transmissions of Jesus or Muhammed for examples.

With all of these givings--and mis-givings--in view, we offer this next step in the transmission of the Dances and Walks of Murshid Samuel Lewis with all humility and with the hope that the Will and Pleasure of the Divine will, in the words of Hazrat Inayat Khan, “use us for the purpose that Thy Wisdom chooseth.”

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(March 2001)

## #11 Remembering Murshid Moineddin Jablonski

*"I am not Murshid; \*we\* are Murshid. I do not have all the answers; \*we\* may have all the answers."*

—Moineddin Jablonski (from his collection of sayings, "Job's Tears")

It is difficult today for me to write about the man who was my Sufi guide for almost 20 years, difficult because his passing is still so close and the pain still very fresh. It would be easy to use standard Sufi language about him going to the Beloved or about how the transmission of Murshid Samuel Lewis, through the Dances and otherwise, will carry on, all of which is true. Yet to dwell on "rising above" the personal loss of one's friend and teacher would seem to this person inauthentic to the way that Moineddin lived and taught.

Being Moineddin's student was really like having two different guides. Before his first successful kidney transplant (about 1981), Moineddin impressed one as a master of Dance, Walk, darshan, commentary and virtually everything else that Murshid Samuel Lewis did.

I remember in 1977 waiting for darshan with him at the Mentorgarten, Murshid Samuel Lewis's former home in San Francisco. When I was called into the meditation room, he told me, 'Now I'm going to give you the darshan of all the Messengers in the prayer Salat [of Hazrat Inayat Khan]' He did, progressively, in one long inhalation, taking me with him. As a young student, I left the room stunned. Today, as a somewhat older student, I'm still stunned when I remember it, still reliving that breath.

This Moineddin was a master and a saint, and there was no doubt in anyone's mind that he was Murshid Samuel Lewis's successor. The collection of his early poems and sayings (which he entitled "Job's Tears") showed a suffering servant who had not only experienced but embodied effacement in the being both of his teacher as well as Hazrat Inayat Khan. But one of his poems from his later collection, entitled "The Color of Her Hair" (TCOOH), written after he "resurrected" shows the cracks he discovered in his psyche that resulted from trying to be someone else over a prolonged period:

### SUFI POEM

Murshid lasted  
three years  
carrying everything.

This refers to the time between when Murshid Samuel Lewis began to instruct his first students (1967-68) and the time he passed (1971), during which time he "carried everything."

In 1979 I think, there was a "farewell party" for Moineddin in the San Francisco Bay area. He seemed to have run out of options for his failing kidneys. He had been videoed over a number of weeks, leading Walks and Dances, giving darshan. However, a last-chance, successful operation saved his life. He left the Bay area for Hawaii, still remembered as a

saint in the minds of most of us. When he came back, risen again, he was a different person.

Moineddin attributed his resurrection to a comprehensively different way of dealing with his inner self (that is, in Sufi terminology his nafs or basic self). Different, that is, from the way that virtually all of Murshid Samuel Lewis' other students had been dealing with it, which ranged from "rising above" to "killing" it (the latter, being what one finds in a lot of classical Sufi literature). Due to the influence of the Rev. Frida Waterhouse Moineddin discovered what he also wrote about in TCOHH:

#### ME AND MY SHADOW

I divided myself in two.  
Heaven from the chest up,

everything below the belt  
dark and unworthy.

White on black for forty  
years. Then my shadow

showed. Yelled,  
To hell with this!

Either I get included  
or I blow you apart!

Now, this may sound familiar to many of us. In fact, at this point, more than 20 years later, it sounds quite sensible and unrevolutionary, given all the stories of self-destructing spiritual teachers that have proliferated since then. In his first return to the Jamiat in the SF Bay area, I remember him challenging all of us to start dealing with our own nafs, shadow, basic selves or whatever was holding us back. He also required that everyone have a personal, living spiritual guide, no matter who their original teacher was. There was mass resistance to both, for a number of years. Moineddin stood firm and, with examples of spiritual self-destruction proliferating, there was gradual acceptance that "psychology" was not the devil.

It was during this period that, with the support of Murshids Moineddin and Wali Ali, this person received a transmission on retreat that led to the founding of the Dance Network. Moineddin was very supportive of this initiative, which really meant that he had a lot of trust in the resilience of the Dance of Universal Peace transmission and the ability of both Sufis and non-Sufis to care for it. Certainly there was not overwhelming support either for his new "get real" approach or for the idea of allowing non-Sufi initiates access to Dance training and resources. In some way, the challenge to continue the livingness of Murshid Samuel Lewis' transmission, as opposed to its mere nostalgic remembrance, involved both increased depth and breadth at the same time.

Over the years, as more and more spiritual teachers hit the wall and self-destructed (including mureeds of Murshid Samuel Lewis), opposition to Moineddin also softened. What he had been saying that seemed "crazy" started to seem very sane. I'm telling you

all this to show the courage of the man, who when you first met him (at least in his second incarnation), you might be confused about "where the Sufi teacher was."

When he resurrected the first time, Moineddin became for me the description Murshid Samuel Lewis once gave of one of his teachers in Pakistan: "He was the most perfect ordinary human being I ever met." He still had the same power, transmission and capabilities, but it only came out externally when someone was present who could receive it. He manifested as himself, a person of great humour, a unique human being with his own transmission, not a stand-in or substitute or caricature of Murshid Samuel Lewis. I will miss him very much, as a friend and for what he brought to the Sufi path, which unfortunately is still all too unique.

I was on a personal retreat in the Borders of Scotland at the end of February when Moineddin passed into his "second resurrection." The night before I was to leave my retreat cabin, there was a horrendous noise about 2:30 am followed by thunder, lightening, gale winds and blizzarding snow. I had never seen anything like it. It went on for more than 12 hours and I was buried in my cabin for another 2 days, without power but fortunately with a small propane heater and stove. Later I found out that the storm started 11 hours before Murshid passed away. During the retreat I had been meditating with Moineddin's basic selves, with whom I had a connection. His High Self would have been very happy to stay around, but the basic selves had had enough. In this sense, I would make a commentary and tribute to them (and him):

Moineddin lasted 30 years  
sharing everything,  
with a little help from his selves (friends).

I have selected a few of his unpublished poems and sayings below. Hopefully, they will all be published in the near future. May his next resurrection be even better than the last, and may Allah preserve his secret!

\*\*\*

From his first collection of sayings, "Job's Tears" (written about 1979):

A teacher's departure from earth will be an initiation for his disciples; his return, in whatever form, will be an even greater initiation.

The claims of devotees on behalf of their teacher have never led those devotees to enlightenment.

When the spirit of Christ breaks us like bread, we become a communion to all who would share our life.

If you work with what you do have, what you do not have will be added unto you.

Beware, beware! What I thought to be an oasis of realization turned into quicksand of ego.

If Murshid does not like to think about my shortcomings, then I will not dwell on them.

There are those who love Dharma; and there are those who love drama.

What rhythm is to character, melody is to personality.

Mohammed treasured the example and being of Jesus Christ so deeply, that he endeavored to preserve Christ's life for the coming generations in the transmissions that became known as Sufism.

Mastery involves power as such; Sainthood involves power not as such.

The face of obstacles and the face of Allah are as one. If we can look into the face of obstacles as easily as we can look at the smiles of an infant, we shall be very close to the spirit of Murshid.

Murshid's living voice sings through the heart of his every mureed; a thousand springs of inspiration rise from a single Weeping Rock.

As long as I shall live, this is Murshid's house; therefore, O faithful companions, keep me living.

Become a pearl-diver when you say your prayers.

The breath is enough,  
the heart is enough,  
the eye is enough,  
the atmosphere is enough.

Spiritual liberty and spiritual responsibility become one in spiritual realization.

===

From "The Color of Her Hair" (written about 1990):

THE COLOR OF HER HAIR  
(for Iolani)

Standing to pee  
(yet somehow on my knees)  
I plead with my new kidney,  
"Please work. Please work."

This is the frequent prayer  
I make to my new "inhabitant"  
plucked from an eight year old  
girl, brain dead—from what?

After two months the kidney's  
working well. My young donor!  
Also eight, my daughter wants to know  
the color of her hair?

They won't tell us.

## GOING OVER OLD GROUND

I am not monogamous in the dream  
but god-like, antlered.  
I make love to everyone,  
then disappear. People  
point to hoof-prints  
pressed everywhere  
in the earth. But none,  
not even the royal hounds,  
can track the strange animal  
who disappears into  
the ground, the foliage  
and very air into light.

## ABOVE THE GAWKING CIRCUS

Above the gawking circus  
the aging trapeze artist  
spins by her teeth.

This is me at fifty  
biting hold of  
my spinning life.

Working without a net, I grin.  
Bad gums, loose teeth. Still  
the muse seduces me!

## LOVE THE DARKNESS

Love the darkness.  
Daylight eyes  
are no good to you  
when the gate of night  
swings open, here  
where stars  
are but footprints  
of your trackless soul.

## THE OCARINA

Note by clay note  
pipe me down.  
Play the holes of my heart  
that swallow love  
and slowly heal.

## WHEN YOUR DEEP FEAR HAS FOUND YOU

A yellow sunflower will grow  
beside you on the dunghill.  
You will be astonished  
as it turns to face you.  
It will marvel as fire  
comes to eat from  
your hand.

MURSHID SAM  
(for Joe)

His broken shoes traveled  
India, Japan, Chinatown,  
the Haight. Everywhere  
he went he said These  
are my people.

SONG

Let the world  
of children's  
voices rising  
from playgrounds  
take you for  
the moment  
away from  
yours.

###

(#12, Spring 2002)

## **#12 "I AM STILL FURTHER"**

As a young student in Sufism, I was on personal retreat in December 1981 and received in vision the message from Murshid Samuel Lewis to start a school of the Dances open to all, collaborating with the best teachers then available: "Water dry minds with word and dance.... I will protect the teachers you give your blessing to, whether they are initiates or not."

The voice went on to describe in detail a program of residential study for prospective teacher of the Dances, which included the Walks, visiting local Dance meetings and "cleaning up the kitchens." It can be difficult to know for a young student to know whether such voices are imagination or really vision. When it was confirmed by my teachers, the only sure way to tell was to try it out. "Hope for the best, but struggle like hell," Murshid told me. "You will meet some opposition, mostly from those who have been busy elsewhere and have not heard the call."

And so it went. The International Dance Network as we know it was started first as a "school," (then called the Center for the Study of Spiritual Dance and Walk, and based at the Mentorgarten in San Francisco). But after only two years, the inspiration came to re-establish it as a "network and research center," that is, an organization whose "center" could be anywhere and everywhere. At the time, this model was still relatively new, and most spiritual organizations were controlled and planned from a fixed center.

In April of this year, I attended the third annual retreat of the three main Sufi groups that connect to the lineage of Hazrat Inayat Khan, held in April at the Abode of the Message in upstate NY. While in the past some of us have seen it as a failing that there are three groups and not one preserving this legacy, in reality we have now discovered, by meeting and sharing deeply with each other, that the most robust and diverse system is not one that is centrally planned or controlled. If Hazrat Inayat Khan had wished to establish the strongest, most diverse expression of his work in organized form, he could not have done better than to have established it as a "distributed network," with many different approaches and centers of growth. This was the vision behind the original Dance Network.

Just as the breath goes through inspiration, pause, exhalation, pause, so do all human beings. Since it is human beings who establish organizations and communities, both of these ways of being together go through the same phases of energy that the breath does. So when an organization is completely centrally planned, then when its single center goes through a "pause" or an "exhalation," then so does the whole work.

The strength of the Dance Network to date has been that, even when one area of work or one region has gone through its "exhalation," others can continue to thrive and grow. This is like the difference between one computer and the internet. One computer can be disabled by a virus, but the whole Internet, which has no "center," cannot be completely disabled.

This is why I have at times seemed reactive to "planning principles" drawn from either the economic models of communism or capitalism, both of which stress central planning and control, in order to produce the maximum amount of goods or services. These



models often don't take into account their "environment," whether we define this as the earth or the community of beings affected. Under "natural" conditions, an eco-system can revive itself over time. The breath comes in again. However, when some additional factors are introduced ( for instance, artificial, petroleum-based fertilizer), the system cannot recover or only more slowly.

On the other end of the harvest, we know that fast-food/McDonald's culture does not contribute to the health of bodies (either human or otherwise), but the introduction of huge amounts of money in advertising and production make this food much more popular and less expensive than organic, whole foods. This is why I have been so concerned with similar factors that can affect the growth/re-growth, the in-breath and out-breath of our Dance Network in its many forms and faces. We could easily devise and fund a form of "lite DUP," one that would tie into the aspects of our advertising/television/merchandizing culture that subtly and not-so-subtly encourage us to be more frantic, superficial, disembodied and grasping. But in attaining "popularity" in this way, we would be exactly working against the main goals of the Dances.

To really feel asks us to be able to concentrate in the heart, for a period of time, not to simply jump from one superficial emotion to the next. Recently, I wrote to one of my Dance mentees:

"Again, many thanks for your sincere devotion and work. It is difficult to work "four-dimensionally," that is, not only with linear goals or ideas of "success" with the Dances or Aramaic work, but also seeing the people with whom we work clearly, as they are, and as they are becoming, over time. If we wish to "plan" for the future, it must be this type of holistic planning, which is more like nurturing an ecosystem than any sort of linear development."

I believe that what we need for the future are not written "goals," but a better feeling-with/working with relationship with those whom we see as different (whether from other countries or regions or within them). We need to hear them clearly and not draw immediate conclusions or try to "fix" problems without a larger feeling of community in place. We need also to bring more younger people, not only into our Dances, but into our work of organizational transformation. They, more than anyone, will help carry the Dances into the next generation, because they are the next generation. It was, after all, those of us in our 20's and 30's who started this phase of the work...20 years ago!

At the end of my retreat, 20 years ago, I had received several gifts: the first form of the Aramaic Prayer cycle Dances, a Nuri Mohammed zikr, dances from Solomon and Mother Krishnabai. I have learned that gifts like this are more like responsibilities that one prepares oneself over many years to share. The most valuable gift was the message I received at the end of the retreat, as though from the heart of the cosmos:

"I AM  
STILL FURTHER."

###

(#13, Spring 2003)

### **#13 Introducing Islam in Dance Circles**

Many Dance leaders have asked me about books that introduce the universal side of Islam, as interpreted by Muslims themselves. With the Middle East continually in the news, it behoves us to be very knowledgeable about this tradition, whatever our own may be. People whose only source of information about Islam is the mass media will no doubt confront us as we lead the Dances. As I have often said, if CNN were around during the Crusades, Christianity would not have a very good reputation either.

During my sabbatical over the past six months, I was asked to re-edit and introduce one of the best books on Islam: *Heart of the Koran* by the late Lex Hixon. Hixon, a sheikh in the Jerrahi tradition, not only introduces Islam in a clear and engaging way, he also relates his own profound experiences in the tradition. Perhaps best of all Hixon renders many key chapters in the Koran itself. These are simply some of the best translations available. As Hixon says, these renderings stay very close to the basic meaning of the text, which he defines as the actual spiritual experience that Muslims have upon hearing or reading it. At the publisher's request, I reorganized Lex's translations according to the main Koranic themes represented and introduced each. I have included below some of my short commentaries on these themes. I heartily recommend the entire book.

#### **Judgment: The Process of Cause and Effect**

The Koran balances the ever-present experience of creation's possibility with the experience of judgment: reaping the consequences of our actions here and now. In this sense, "time begins" at any moment that we live in attunement with our divine purpose, the process of becoming. "Time ends" whenever some event cause us to stop what we're doing and face up to the effects we have caused from a sense of self separate from the One. In this regard, the Koran frequently mentions the "day of judgment" (*maliki yaumadin*). This day can be any day, any moment, any small "death" that our limited self experiences, which can that lead us to re-consider and align ourselves with the Source of Being. "Most human beings perceive the end of time as far away, but the Ever-Present Source, above both time and eternity, knows the eternal Day to be near to every life with the most intimate nearness" (Sura 70:6-7).

In this sense, the Day of Truth and the Day of Creation are the same in the eternal moment of Allah. According to one story, the Prophet Muhammad just before his passing said to his followers, "I leave you two teachers--one speaking, the other silent. The speaking teacher is the Koran. The silent one is the awareness of your own death." For this reason, the Sufis have for centuries attempted through contemplation to follow the advice of the Prophet's saying: "die before your death."

#### **Religious Diversity**

The Quran contains many comments about the diversity of human religions and the underlying unity of them all in one nameless ground of reality. It says clearly that the message being given through the Prophet Muhammad is not a new one, and that Muslims should spurn any attempts to make it sectarian, cultic or exclusive. "Please do not pay the least attention to any sectarian views, but courageously and openly proclaim to all: 'I affirm the truth of every Revelation which has come down as a Holy Book from the Source of Truth, and I am instructed by this very Source to be impartial among the peoples of Revelation. The Ever-Present Source Who calls Itself by countless Divine Names is the Source of our spiritual nation and your spiritual nations. We have our

integral practice of the holy way of life, as you have yours. There need be no fundamental disagreement among us. Allah Most High will draw us all together as we return home to the Source of Love.” (Sura 42:15).

Despite some Western views of Islam, and some more modern Islamic fundamentalist interpretations of it, the original message is simply and clearly one of harmony and tolerance.

### **The Prophets**

Within the context of an underlying ground of Unity, the Koran re-introduces the reader to some of the prophets and messengers of the Middle East who preceded Muhammad. It mentions Jesus more often than any previous prophet and contains portions of suras devoted to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Joseph, and others, some named and others unnamed. The prophets who gave a sacred book receive special attention, and so the Koran considers the “peoples of the Book” with equal honor. In a passage not rendered by Lex Hixon, the Koran says,

“Tell everyone: ‘We believe in the One Being, and what has been revealed to you, and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and to the tribes, and what was given to Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets from their Source. We will make no distinction between any of them, and we resign ourselves to the same Source of All’” (Sura 3:84, editor’s translation).

The word for prophet in Arabic, *nabi*, need not indicate a person with a public mission. By one rendering, it can mean “one who gives forth what the divine spirit of creation and abundance has given her/him.” In this sense, the Koran calls each person to be Lover and Friend of Allah.

### **Prayer**

In addition to speaking about the nature of ultimate reality and of revelation, the Koran offers human beings a way of living. The “five pillars” of Islam—profession of faith (*shahada*), prayer (*salat*), giving to charity (*zakat*), fasting during the month of Ramadan (*sawm*) and pilgrimage (*hajj*)—all have inner and outer dimensions as described by the Koran.

Prayer in Islam is not merely a matter of saying particular words at particular times. The attitude of praise leads one to the threshold of the wordless reality of Allah, such that we can also see prayer as the uninterrupted contemplation of the One Being. Purification before prayer (ablution or *wudu*) happens not only outside, but also inside as one strives to keep one’s thoughts and emotions centered on Allah. Likewise the direction in which Muslims pray, toward the Ka’bah in Mecca, represents not only a physical place, but also the heart of Allah, which ultimately is found within the heart of one’s own, and every, being.

### **Struggle with the Small Self: Honesty and Justice**

The Koran also mentions *jihad*, literally “struggle,” as a dimension of living a sacred life. The so-called “Holy War” is not a pillar of Islam, however, and in any offensive sense, is an innovation from after the time of Muhammad. Every battle fought by the young Muslim community during Muhammad’s lifetime was defensive. When the early Muslim community finally returned to Mecca, shortly before Muhammad’s passing, the Prophet famously said that the time for the lesser, outer struggle was over and the time for the greater, inner struggle (*mujahid*) with one’s own self-centered tendencies was to begin.

The Koran repeatedly enjoins all Muslims to act with honesty and justice, not only towards other Muslims but also towards everyone they meet.

### **Lovers of Love: A Life of Compassion**

Despite what some Western media portray, and what is often misunderstood by Muslims themselves, wearing any particular dress or attire is not a “pillar” of Islam. That it has become so important in the last hundred years says more about political and cultural struggles for identity that arose between Europe and the Muslim world than about the original nature of Islam itself, which was intended to embrace all peoples, races and cultures. Needless to say, the interpretation of the various Islamic practices and what constitutes the absolute essentials of *shariah*, the way of Islam, remains a controversial point amongst Muslims themselves to this day.

The Koran repeatedly emphasizes living a life of modesty, gratitude, honesty, justice, compassion and love. More than any outward signs of piety, it sees these qualities as identifying the real Muslim, the person surrendered to the shared nature of the One Reality.

(All quotes from the Koran are from *Heart of the Koran* by Lex Hixon (Quest Books, new, revised edition Fall 2003).

###

(Spring 2004)

#### **#14 On the Dances as Spiritual Practice**

Over the years I have found that one of most important (and often difficult) things to communicate to beginning Dance teachers is the message that the Dances of Universal Peace are not primarily dance. They are spiritual practices that change consciousness.

This simple fact shifts the theatre of work (for both beginning teacher and mentor) in a profound way. If we were primarily teaching steps, movements, music and performance-oriented leadership skills, we could use the same approaches used to teach folk dance teachers or musicians. We could easily communicate the basics in a weekend (or less). In my home country of Scotland, where pride in local culture runs high, this happens all the time. In addition, we would not need to educate teachers about their ethical responsibilities, since in a folk dance circle (even one that calls itself "sacred"), there is no essential difference in power or influence between teacher and student.

The difficulty in training Dances of Universal Peace teachers is that they carry essentially the same responsibilities as therapists or spiritual teachers, but often with much less training. When Tasnim Fernandez and I founded the Mentor Teachers Guild about 15 years ago, our hope was that some of the subtleties could be communicated in a master-apprentice relationship, just as they had been for centuries in various spiritual traditions. No spiritual path has ever succeeded in making spiritual growth into a system or curricula that always works under all circumstances.

Mentors and mentees face significant challenges. First, the depth of connection between a Dance mentor and mentee does not usually approach that which develops between a spiritual guide and his/her student. Mentees often believe that they're coming to get "skills," and find instead that their mentors are talking about developing "atmosphere," "intention" and "magnetism." If the mentor-mentee relationship develops in trust and respect, some of this can be communicated. If not, a mentee needs to honestly look at his/her own spiritual path to see whether it actually offers the experience of growth or merely the comfort of belonging to a particular group or religion.

A folk dance or music teacher would focus a student on elements of performance and how to be a charismatic entertainer. We see this in the popular "reality" shows, which of course have little to do with reality and everything to do with the superficial nature of what our culture recognizes as fame and talent. Instead, a Dance mentor would focus students on developing fluency in inner states of feeling and perception (such as those developed by the element and planetary walks), so that they could open themselves to be used by their highest guidance in service to (rather than manipulation of) their circle. Especially for those who have a background in performance or teaching, the confusion of personal charisma with genuine (and genuinely powerful) effacement in the divine can prove an obstacle.

Likewise, the importance of developing a "repertoire" shifts when we focus on the Dances as a spiritual practice. In teaching the Dances to a circle, it is not the Dance itself that is important, but rather the state(s) of consciousness that it makes accessible to a group. This depends to a large extent on the familiarity of the leader with his/her own inner pathways of feeling. So the same Dance led by two different people may have very different results, even with the same group. On the other hand, "new" Dances that don't

lead us into genuinely new inner territory, but simply rehash sentiments or feelings from other Dances are the equivalent of pop culture's fifteen minutes of fame.

Similarly, new Dance teachers may come to a mentor for help developing a "list" of Dances in order to meet the certification guidelines. From the mentor's side, however, I would assign a Dance to a mentee as I might assign a spiritual practice—because of what the practice could evoke in the student. So in this sense the Dances develop the teachers rather than the teachers develop the Dances. When a new teacher increases in self-awareness, compassion and respect for others, the work is easy and outer certification comes merely as a confirmation of the inner work the person has already recognized in him/herself. When the focus is backwards—outside in rather than inside out—everything becomes muddled. Then questions like "why haven't I been recognized sooner" begin to crop up.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we cannot offer either Dancers or Dance mentees any assurances: "If you believe or act in such and such a way, you will be a success (or be 'saved')." In a culture that values both success and certainty, we offer the anti-success and uncertainty of change and transformation as the only constant. Yes, the warm connection with others in a Dance circle offers joy, a deeper sense of friendship and compassion. But the gift offered is to be given away, not possessed. To try to capitalize on it or control it for one's own benefit spoils the gift.

In light of these challenges, humility and common sense provide some antidotes for either despair or grandiosity. The best prayer or affirmation for Dancers, Dance leaders and mentors may be some version of the sentiment expressed by Hazrat Inayat Khan, who faced very similar challenges in work with his students almost a hundred years ago: "Use us for the purpose that Thy wisdom chooses.

###

(Spring 2005)

## #15 The Dances and Interfaith Work Today

*"Words are not peace. Thoughts are not peace. Plans are not peace. Programs are not peace.... The total of humanity is a society of myriads of personalities, which must work together in and with and under God. Only this must be experiences and not syllogisms, truth and not truism."*  
--Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, 1965.

Today we see more interfaith movements, publications and conferences than ever before. This must be good news for those of us dedicated to finding the heart of unity behind and within the shells of religious organization pervading the world today. Searches on the Internet reveal no fewer than a half dozen world organizations dedicated to peace through religion.

On the other hand, the dialogue and actual sharing of spiritual experience in many interfaith gatherings I have attended remains superficial at best. Too many interfaith gatherings today consist of various speakers making position statements to each other (often with only slightly-veiled undertones of theological or political one-upmanship).

Much of this has to do with the politicization of religion in the past 20 years, a process that has created the modern phenomena called religious "fundamentalism," which is anything but fundamental to the original vision of the prophets or saints in whose name fundamentalists claim to speak. (For a wonderful book on this topic, see the English writer Karen Armstrong's *The Battle for God*). "Safe" interfaith work then involves various faith "representatives" attempting to make middle of the road statements, which are supposed to somehow represent the singular Jewish, Islamic, Christian or other position on a question. The model used here is that of a parliament or assembly, where our elected representatives are supposed to legislate on our behalf. The fact that this model doesn't fit a world in which there is no single Jewish, Islamic, Christian or other opinion about anything does not seem to deter most people in these gatherings. We could say that at least people of different points of view are sitting together; however, real connection and any deep meeting is rare in such a context.

Another factor that works against real interfaith dialogue and sharing is the continuing individualization and commercialization of Western culture, which tells us, in effect, "everyone is on his/her own, and there is no underlying ground of unity or meeting, so get what you can now." On a commercial level, this creates a radically different definition of democracy than anyone would have had 50 years ago, essentially: "democracy" as used by most politicians now means your right to purchase whatever I choose to sell you and my right to make sure (even by force) that you can and will do so.

In such a world, a practice like the Dances of Universal Peace, which accept as a given that there is a deeper ground for spiritual meeting, an underlying Reality by whatever name we call it, remains a prophetic voice. By prophetic I mean one that is often disturbing rather than soothing, if it dares to fulfill the vision of its founder.

In Edinburgh, Scotland where I live, some friends and I have been working on a new model of interfaith and inter-spiritual work here as part of our annual Middle Eastern Festival of Spirituality and Peace (MESP), we have articulated some our shared goals in the following way:

- A wide range of spiritual practices will be experienced throughout the Festival. This includes not only spiritual practices such as Jewish Meditation, Sufi Zikr, Christian Prayers of the Heart, etc, but we will also explore forms of spiritual practice such as hospitality, service, deep listening, mindful walking, mindful eating, as well as spiritual forms of art and culture. As an example of the latter includes Samuel Lewis's vision of the Dances of Universal Peace which was seen as part of his "peace through the arts" program.
- This presents the challenge and the opportunity for the spiritual practices to step out of their envelopes of comfort and interact with, and influence, the wider culture of inter-faith and interspiritual peacemaking and peace awakening. What we have to offer is an emphasis on spirituality and interspirituality, not merely as "fuel" for peace activism, but as part of the peacemaking and peace awakening process itself.
- Almost all inter-faith work today emphasizes talk and dialogue. While important, this has been going on for decades and we need now to address many of the critical issues of contemporary society. In order to really understand another person we need to meet them deeply, to get to know that person, and, in short, to share spiritual practice with them, not merely engage in isolated bubbles of "dialogue," only engaged from the neck up.
- The Edinburgh Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace was envisioned from the start as a different kind of meeting place. We are not merely bringing presenters who understand the above approach, but also ones that can benefit from being exposed to it, by meeting other peacemakers and practitioners of peace awakening. All real meetings are deeply spiritual, if we allow space for them to be so. In addition, we are making space in the process not merely for "mainstream" representatives of various religious traditions, which is the usual approach of inter-faith work, but also voices "from the fringes" - the mystical and prophetic voices that have always brought forth solutions and ideas outside the box of what is thought possible.
- One of the purposes of MESP has been to show that a great range of opinion exists not only between traditions but also within each. The idea that any one group or person can claim to speak for the totality of any religion or spiritual tradition is outdated in a multi-cultural society, and many scholars of religious studies or comparative spirituality today prefer to speak, for instance, of multiple Christianities, Judaisms and Islams. The media's tendency to want to stereotype any particular tradition or religion or to quote a single "Christian," "Jewish," or "Islamic" opinion on any issue has often hampered more than helped religious and inter-religious understanding.

Throughout the history of the Middle Eastern spiritual traditions, the mystics and prophets have often offered points of view contrary to the prevailing mainstream. From Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross in the Christian tradition to the Sufis al-Hallaj and



Suhrawardi in the Islamic tradition to the historical prophets of the Hebrew bible, they have often suffered for it. In modern times, prophets and mystics continue to offer their voices for new, non-violent solutions to conflict, even when these opinions subject them to criticism or danger.

If we live up to the heritage that Samuel Lewis set for us, then essentially we cannot expect a "comfy couch" of acceptance whenever we lead Dances of Universal Peace or spiritual practice that offers people a genuine experience of deep meeting. Faced with this, we can either retreat to just "dancing amongst ourselves" or reach out to a wider community, with the risk that things will not always go smoothly. You can guess which alternative I believe Murshid Sam would have done. As he wrote to in a letter to one of his students, Sara Morgan, "We may seem to be about music and dancing, but my real work is peace on earth."

*(The 2005 Edinburgh International Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace was held from February 19-March 6. Details of this and plans for next year's 2006 Festival can be found at [www.eial.org](http://www.eial.org), the website of the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning.)*

###

(Spring 2006)

## #16 The Last Deeper Side

Dear Friends,

This is the 16<sup>th</sup>, and for now, final column of the Deeper Side of Dance. As you will find elsewhere in this issue, in January 2005, I resigned as the co-chair of the Mentor Teachers Guild. After ten years, it also feels like time to retire this reverie on the ongoing potential and possibility for human transformation that the Dances of Universal Peace offer.

I want to thank particularly two friends who were there at the start of the Dance Network 25 years ago and provided the most support--in all ways: Murshida Kamae Amrapali Miller and Murshida Tasnim Hermila Fernandez. Without them it would not have been possible for this experiment not only to survive, but also to flourish so quickly that in the first ten years alone, the geographical expansion of the Dances was simply phenomenal. Geographical expansion was not our main goal in the early days. It was simply to allow the Dances to grow into new forms, expressing a greatly increased range of spiritual traditions (which in the late 1970s were largely confined to Hinduism and Sufism, with one or two Dances from other traditions). We were also motivated by the need to allow the Dances and Walks to burst the seed pod of the Ruhaniat Sufi community, which at the time only trained and certified teachers from its own lineage (and largely expected that new Dances would only arise from the same community). We were likewise challenged to provide ways of training that would minimize Sufi terminology, while at the same time acknowledge the full history of our Dance ancestors and communicate a transmission that ultimately cannot be expressed in words.

Personally, I plan to continue to allow new Dance work to come through. In fact, I don't seem to have any choice. Over the years I found that whenever something would come through (for instance, the Aramaic Beatitudes), I was being prepared for some challenge and opportunity in my everyday life. Sometimes these challenges seemed beyond my ability to cope with them, and I asked the Spirit of Guidance to slow down, or even stop. But it just went right along. Today I don't ask or not ask. Someone recently asked me the secret of my "success," and I replied. "Simple. It's 'Use us for the Purpose that Thy Wisdom chooses' plus a lot of hard work.

Unbelievable though it may seem, we began the entire Dance Network in 1982 with \$500 and a mailing list that fit on five letter-sized sheets of labels. The people who have been touched by the Dances and Walks since then probably number at least a million.

Consistent with our Sufi roots, the Dance Network has drawn people who are independently minded and largely resist any attempts to over-organize them. This is, I feel, helpful for both the Dances as well as for the communities and nations in which they play a part. Each has its own flavor, its own gifts to offer, its own ways of organizing, which may be very different from what happens in the USA, or from what we did in the beginning.

When I visited the Wilderness Camp in Utah last year, I asked the group this question: "What if, after a hundred years, the only things that remained of the Dances of Universal Peace, as we know them now, were people holding hands in a circle at the beginning and hugging each other at the end? What if entirely new ways of moving with sacred feeling

and phrase were to arise?" I hoped that these questions would give pause to any attempts to rush new Dances into existence in which the movements are largely derivative, or even irrelevant to helping us feel the uniqueness of a spiritual tradition or a particular sacred phrase. In an era in which more and more people are becoming "couch potatoes," we don't need more "meaningless dexterities of the body" as Ruth St Denis put it. In the potential that Murshid Samuel Lewis holds out for us, the interweaving of music, feeling and movement can be as seamless and as powerful as the wordless unity-in-diversity to which we aspire.

It seems to me that the Dances are in a very healthy condition today. Excellent new mantric dances are coming through leaders all the time. Regions in five continents are evolving their own ways of working. In the beginning we probably focused a bit too much on outreach, "saving the world through Dance," the proverbial dancing chicken in every pot. It is very difficult to measure success with such a grandiose goal. Today, I much prefer to see my work as providing the best and deepest experience for those in whatever circle I find myself. Given this goal, as my teacher Moineddin once said, even my worst may be good enough, if offered at the right time.

Love and blessings,  
Saadi