

Attuning to Native American Tradition

by Alana Lakhme Lea



The following passages are excerpted from materials prepared by a Native American committee in Oregon, to clarify the purpose and intention behind sharing Dances of Universal Peace honoring Native American traditions in Portland Public Schools. During the time that I worked on this curriculum guide with them, and during the following years while I traveled to reservations of Lakota, Nespelem and Navajo friends, I learned a few personal lessons that I would like to share with other dance leaders.

“Provide dancers with an understanding of their interdependence with nature and other humans, that we should coexist as one humanity. Indian nations and personal identities are shaped by the Indian's relation to the land. Indian people see themselves as caretakers of the natural world. The earth is the source of all life. Indians give reverence to the earth and to the wonders of life coming from Mother Earth. This identity is the basis of Native American beliefs, spiritual practices and religion.

All of humanity is related as one family, and shares a common mother, Mother Earth. As a family, we must all care for and respect one another. Native American cultures continually adapt their beliefs and behaviors in search of balance (in nature), harmony (in relationships), and the power of life (living up to one's potential). Native American dances are steeped in tradition and intimately related to all phases of life - ceremony, ritual and religion.

Where there are Native Americans who are involved with the living traditions of their peoples, there is dance. There is song, there is drumming and music. There are the dancers, precisely stepping the rhythms and shaking or sweeping gracefully in the movements that were first taught by animals, spirits and dreams. There is a renewal of the movements that awaken the Native American heart and its feelings to the truths of Indian identity and Indian potentials. There are audiences appreciative of the gifts given by the dancers, enlivened by being in the presence of something sacred. There is magic and there is transformation. There, in the powwow, at the rodeos, in the circles of the encampments, in the longhouses, in front of crowds in the plazas of the pueblos, or alone in the woods and deserts, the doing and the witnessing of traditional Indian dance links us in the Circle of Life with all those who have stepped the steps before and all who will do so in ages to come.

For the Indian, music (and dance) is not an art, but an expression or manifestation of life. Generally speaking, he would hardly describe it as 'beautiful', but rather as 'powerful' or 'effective.' The functions it performs in his life are just as natural and varied as all his other activities taken as a whole. Music (and dance) for the individual represents a source of power and for the tribal association a means of reaching an understanding with the supernatural beings from whom they ask all good things...The native does not sing or dance in order to demonstrate his skill or express the way he is feeling. And he does not set out to entertain or flatter his audience. He sings and dances in order to honor...His music (and dance) is an expression of his beliefs and hopes...The dominant element is the rhythm and the melody is secondary to it.”

Personal Notes for Dances of Universal Peace Leaders

They asked me, “Why don't your people find their OWN roots and practices?” “Why do so many Anglos look to us for our religious practices?” “Where is the white 'medicine' ?” These are questions I was being asked by Melvin Greybear, a respected Lakota elder. He encourages

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us to find the healing ways that come from our personal truth of this incarnation. Where were WE born? Into what heritage? What religion? They say that if we don't know where we've come from, we don't know where we're going. It is easy for many of us to fall into behaviors that Native friends would laughingly call “wanna-be.” We admire and respect their unbroken traditions, find their practices inspiring and compelling and “wanna-be” like them. Well, let's just be who WE really are.

We can honestly approach our dance leading from this basis of understanding: that we are honoring our global relations and sending any energy we may generate to them, for healing as they request it. If we lead a dance with the idea that we are doing what they do, in the same way they do it, we are only fooling ourselves, and anyone else who steps into our circle.

If you ever have Native people present in your dance circles, take note that their response could be anywhere from praise and gratitude for remembering their heritage (that they, or their parents, may have been punished for practicing in the not so distant past), to deeply offended that non-Natives assume that they know what they are doing. There are even the possible repercussions of arousing the attention of groups such as AIM, American Indian Movement, who are adamant and even militant, about Native practices being kept intact ONLY by Native traditional teachers. If we were to put ourselves forward, inferring that we are teaching Native American dances, we are targets for major controversy. Let's be very clear about who we are and why we do what we do.

Remember: the Native American Religious Freedom Act is very recent, less than twenty years old. In spite of this so-called law, Natives are still persecuted in many inhumane ways around this country for carrying on their spiritual practices. This is one reason why many nations carry their practices deep within and in secrecy. We can offer the energy of our prayers and dances to ask Creator that the injustices end now, and that all people, everywhere, are free to worship God in the way they naturally find.

PLEASE do your homework before presenting a dance, even if it is one you've led hundreds of times before. This is important for all dances that we offer, but perhaps even more so for the Native American inspired dances, because this is the land of their emergence. Learn which nation the words or vocables (sounds like “hey a na na”) come from. Don't slip by telling your dancers that these are traditional dances, for in fact they aren't. In each case, our dances come from a variety of sources, Native and non-Native, with the movements and melodies, more often than not, made up by Anglos.

If you turn within a dance (like “We Circle Around”), attune to the movements of a native dancer who might have wings strapped to his arms, rather than whirling like a Dervish!

Honor the people by being sure movements don't become stereotypical “Indian” gestures.

Listen to rhythm patterns by Native drummers: you'll never find a ONE, two, three, four, ONE, two, three, four pattern. You'll seldom go wrong with a heartbeat. Try just using a drum with these dances, pass on the guitar.

When sidestepping, accent the first step to the side, with a quick step to meet it: ONE, two, ONE, two...Go to a Pow-Wow and watch the feet of the dancers as they step, especially the traditional women, and participate in a “friendship” round dance to get it in your body.

When ending a dance with “Aho,” do it deeply and with intention. This sacred sound is a favorite wanna-be expression these days. Remind your dancers that this is a very personal, private way to affirm the dance with the “song of your breath.” Silence could be more honoring than a chorus of “Aho's” that are superficial.