

Elements of Mastery:

The Dances as Sacred Art:

Embodying the Universal Creative Force

By Munir Peter Reynolds

The Elements of Mastery column explores the art, craft and spiritual practice of Dance leading and mentoring through the reflections and perspectives of individual mentors. Comments and discussion are welcome either on [InTheGarden](#) or on [our Facebook page](#). Ideas for future topics are welcome, as are offers to prepare articles -- please contact the Executive Director.

One must be willing to stand alone—in the unknown, with no reference to the known or the past or any of one's conditioning. One must stand where no one has stood before in complete nakedness, innocence, and humility....For then that which is sacred, undivided, and whole is born within consciousness and begins to express itself. – Adyashanti from the essay “An Inner Revolution” © 2008.

As we travel the path of leading the Dances of Universal Peace and Walking Concentrations we may find our lives become increasingly under the influence of something beyond our knowing. It may be impossible to lead the Dances and not eventually come to contemplate the questions that challenge the deeply held notions of the separate self: “Who am I? Who is leading this Dance, for whom, and why? What is the message? What is being revealed?” Answers to questions like these may seem clearer in the beginning of our journey, less clear later. We may think we know, or not know. But, in time we may feel that something Other, something in the unseen, has taken hold and begun to have “its way” with us.

Hazrat Inayat Khan said “The Life absolute from which has sprung all that is felt, seen and perceived, and into which all again merges in time, is a silent, motionless and eternal life which among Sufis is called Dhat (zat). Every motion that springs forth from this silent life is a vibration and a creator of vibrations.”¹ He points to the Sufi view of the human being standing in the doorway (darwesh) between the relative and the Absolute order of being – between stillness and movement, inner and the outer, “this world” and “that world.” In our work with the Dances, a potential exists to unite with a force that is rooted in the silent and eternal, yet expressed through the boundless creativity we see in the natural world all around us. As we become more silent inwardly and attuned to what Inayat Khan speaks of, what we bring forth reflects the power and creativity of Wholeness itself.

Art that flows from this mysterious depth has been called sacred art. Sacred art recapitulates the cosmic order of the seen and unseen worlds. Sacred art could be said to be the true art, because it is untainted by the ego notions that human beings often bring to their creations. These include the affectations and the need to make a personal statement that says “Look at me!” The attractions, aversions and self-glorifying tendencies of the ego are what we may see in the works of highly creative but often neurotic contemporary artists.

Sacred art operates on a completely different level. Sacred art scholar and self-described “rogue astronomer” John Martineau in his work on sacred geometry has noted some of the attributes that set sacred art apart. *Sacred art:*

*1) Is transitory 2) Uses natural materials 3) Follows sacred proportion and design and 4) Is unsigned.*² What it would mean to adhere to these principles in leading the Dances of Universal Peace?

A Transitory Creation

Like the sand paintings of the Buddhist monks, sacred art is intended to be impermanent. It flowers forth with a vision of wholeness or integration. But that vision cannot last long. Destroying the sand painting and going home is part of the process. We cannot separate the process of creation from the destruction that is sure to follow. So, sacred art is transitory. It emerges from the Mystery and returns to it, leaving perhaps only an impression of wholeness or unity. Even a split-second impression, however, can alter the course of a human life.

In the realm of the Dances of Universal Peace, we know that the Dance has a beginning and an end. The music dies away, the dancers become still and the silence that preceded the Dance again envelopes it. Surrendering to that silence and stillness through breath and awareness is a primary practice for us. Dance leaders need to respect the silence – the ground underneath everything we do – as our canvas. Taking time in teaching the Dance and leaving space for things to be integrated and reformed in silence can deepen our collective presence in the exquisite atmosphere created through the Dance.

As dance leaders we need to surrender to this element of impermanence, especially for instance if we may be tempted to try to repeat an experience we had the last time we led a particular dance. Such thoughts rise from an effort to control our experience and others. Trusting our capacity, staying in the moment and bringing the best we have to it will always yield better results. The Dance leader must always be awake enough to feel into and respond with what is appropriate “now”.

We resist impermanence in other ways. Sometimes while a Dance is being taught we bring out our recording devices in an effort to “capture” it. Our thoughts about the future turn the Dance from an unknown potential we are about to experience into a “thing”. This is a subtle difference, but an important one. Having taken on the view of the Dance as something to be recorded so we can lead it at a later date makes us less available to experience the Dance in the moment. We rationalize doing this because we want to build up our perceived value in some way in the “future”. But, even the future exists only as an idea in our minds. Contrast this with what Rumi says: “Don't worry about saving these songs! And if one of our instruments breaks, it doesn't matter. We have fallen into the place where everything is music.”

This movement of the false self to accumulate and build up an image in spiritual pursuits, is what the meditation master Chogyam Trungpa called “spiritual materialism.”³ This extends to any attachment for our self image, including the need for *dancing*. Can we allow that there is a time for dancing and then a time for integrating what has happened, for living our lives? Our experience on the Dance floor – unguarded, authentic and hearts open – is time spent preparing for life everywhere else. We need to accept that more and more dancing is not necessarily the

pathway to our own liberation. The need for ever more experiences, including dancing, can simply be our justification adding to what Trungpa calls “our accumulation of learning and virtue”⁴.

Becoming empty of self, remembering our impermanence and that of the Dance brings us closer to the source from which all manifestation and inspiration arises.

Use of Natural Materials

Sacred art is made from the natural substances of the earth. This art sees no intrusion of anything artificial. The sand paintings are example of this, as are the stone gothic cathedrals of Europe. We create our Dances using only our bodies, voices and perhaps some musical instruments made from the materials of the Earth.

Adorning the dance space with natural objects and dancing outdoors in nature cooperates with a principle that resonates in our depths. We know that it is appropriate. On the other hand, for instance when we add electronic amplification to the dance music (as is occasionally done) I wonder if we are tampering with this principle of sacred art. Our ears and bodies are set up for unamplified acoustic experiences. Amplification takes things in a direction we have not been used to for a million years of our evolution on the planet. Though it may be considered important for larger groups of dancers, it definitely impacts the experience of our bodies.

Anything artificial involves “artifice”, or pretense. Sacred art can never involve pretense of any kind. What is presented has to be completely itself. We practice sacred art by excluding anything that is not what it appears to be. Authenticity is vitally important in our presentation to the circle. The Dance leader needs to be authentic in all ways and be emotionally and physically available, even if he/she is actually in a vulnerable place. We do not have to “put on” having it all together – but we do have to be trustworthy and genuine. If the tone is genuine throughout, the Dance circle entrains to that and we find depth together.

Sacred Proportion and Design

From our beginnings human beings have attempted to make the sacred manifest in physical form through construction of sacred spaces and monuments. This architecture often draws proportions from sacred texts or ideals like the “golden mean” because it was believed that this produced lines and solids of grace and majesty which inspire awe.

What is the sacred architecture of our Dances? The circle is a universal symbol of wholeness, so even before we have begun the Dance we have assumed a position of unity and integration in relationship to our fellow human beings. The sacred phrase is the cornerstone, the most important element of the Dance’s architecture, and a well-crafted Dance completely serves the sacred phrase. The sacred phrase speaks to something about the human condition and about the living truth of this moment. Our Dance leading is intended to be an extension of what we have found in sacred relationship with our mentor(s), spiritual guides and practices. In preparing a Dance, we contemplate the truth of the sacred phrase and how it challenges, inspires and uplifts us all. Then our leadership of the Dance is a flowing out from something very deep in us, the living truth of the sacred phrase, a stream of blessing through the chain of awakened beings.

The sacred phrase, the movements, music and structure of our Dances point to this quality of sacred proportion. A well-crafted Dance evidences beauty, awe and grace enough to sweep away all thought of self, and we recognize immediately the harmony and integration of it. The Dance movements take us more deeply into our felt sense by connecting our hearts and bodies in the language of soma, or “body”.

We do justice to the sacred proportion of the Dance by being as true to the originator’s intent as possible. We learn the Dance from the originator whenever feasible and we do not lead it until we have internalized the transmission clearly. We invite our dancers to enter into the Dance’s “sacred proportion” by cultivating an economy of teaching, using only the words and time needed, and by calling attention to the meaning of the movements. When all of these elements and proportion are present, the experience is greater than the sum of the parts.

Unsigned

Sacred art, like the stained glass windows in a cathedral, is left unsigned. To sign a work of this kind would be an act of desecration because its purpose is to make such transcendent qualities as Unity or Truth transparent to us in the world of form. Sacred art cannot be attributed to anyone in particular because Sacred Unity, the eternal and the infinite belong to the nondual order of being. There can be no separate persons at this level of reality. Messengers from this realm are chosen in the unseen by forces we cannot know.

The more that Sacred Unity effortlessly moves and expresses through us, the less that we need worry about leaving our fingerprints on a Dance. Here our ideal is not that the Dance leader is invisible but rather that he/she is so at one with the Spirit moving that we simply do not notice him/her in particular – only the Dance itself is being served. Dance Leading becomes a display of integration that shows what is possible for all, indeed opens to the door to that.

Let us make sure that our work with the Dances is left unsigned. And, as a practice we might contemplate what it would mean to leave our entire lives “unsigned,” a simple offering of love and grace.

Spirit Moving Within

The fundamentals of Dance leading described in the [Elements of Mastery](#), (e.g., breath, heart embodiment, rhythm, etc) remain our roadmap and primary concentration in attaining depth in this work. These principles apply to our innate sense and capacity as human beings. The principles of sacred art, on the other hand, speak to what may be happening in and through us in the unseen and the eternal context. We may be aware of this dimension only with our peripheral vision, as if looking into rear view mirror and seeing where we have been, the trail we are leaving behind.

The depth of identity, the “I Am I Am” as we may translate “Inana” in the Aramaic Dances, is our eternal source. Here is the real artist, working through each one who leads the Dances of Universal Peace, whether sensed and acknowledged or not. It may seem impossible to some that we’re not “in charge” of our lives – that something tremendous is actually *living us*. Carl Jung said, “Called or uncalled, God will be present.”⁵ A continual surrendering to that depth can only

lead to increased power, presence and capacity to bring forth sacred art as the Dances of Universal Peace. Why? Because as the contemporary spiritual teacher Adyashanti writes, “For then that which is sacred, undivided, and whole is born within consciousness and begins to express itself.” That expression is beyond our knowing but we can be servants to it as willing artists of the divine order of being, holding true to the principles of sacred art.

The Director of Dances of Universal Peace International, Munir Peter Reynolds is a senior mentor in the Leaders Guild of the Dances of Universal Peace and makes his home in western Montana.



¹ *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*, Hazrat Inayat Khan, The International Headquarters of the Sufi Movement, Geneva © 1991, p. 120

² As quoted on “Crop Circles: Quest for Truth” DVD published by Open Edge Media © 2002. John Martineau is also the author of *A Little Book of Coincidence in the Solar System*, Wooden Books, © 2001.

³ *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, Chogyam Trungpa, Shambhala, Boston 2008.

⁴ *Ibid*, p 29.

⁵ Carl Jung quoted the Latin *Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit* from the Latin writings of Desiderius Erasmus