

Elements of Mastery: Sacred Space – The Dances as Worship

By Farrunnissa Rosa

This article continues our Elements of Mastery column in which we explore the art, craft, and spiritual practice of Dance leading and mentoring. Mentors are invited to submit their reflections on this topic to the Guidance Council.

No dance is a Spiritual Dance because it is called that; it does not mean a certain form or technique, nor a ritual. What must remain is the sacred phrase; this, the sacred phrase, and not the form, is the foundation.

– Samuel L. Lewis (Murshid Sufi Ahmed Murad Chishti)

What is the power of the Dances of Universal Peace?

What is the secret of their enduring appeal?

Why have they spread all over the world, continuing to spread even as we speak?

Ask a dozen Dancers, and you're likely to receive a dozen different answers. For some, it's the power of community, a precious chance to join together with others in a deep experience that is always new, even as it's always familiar. For others, the secret is the feeling-sense that can result—joy, peace, compassion, equanimity, ecstasy. Some will say they love to sing, or love to dance, or love the hugs. Others will say they don't know why they come; it's just something they must do, a call that must be answered.



For me, the power of the Dances lies in the shared, sustained, embodied Sacred Space created by sounding a sacred phrase with simple, heart-felt movement. I know of no other spiritual practice or artistic discipline that is based on these specific combined elements. Each time we join hands in Dance-worship, what can result has the power to transform, to heal, to unite us individually and as a group with All That Is, to bring us home to our true Self. Through the Dances, this power is accessible to virtually all human beings, regardless of age, background, capacity, or belief. This gives us as Dance leaders infinite opportunities to call forth this Sacred Space in myriad ways for countless participants, answering the need of humanity in our time, which is the core principle of the Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty of Hazrat Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan.

What an awesome privilege! What a sacred trust! What a magnificent gift!

So how can we be the best instruments of Divine Presence that we can be? What tools, skills, and practices can help us create a consistent container to hold Sacred Space? Here are some things I've found to be useful, and that I've appreciated from others in our worldwide community. Many of these will be familiar, already part of your Dance leading process.

1. Prepare. This is not only preparing the physical location for holding Sacred Space, but preparing ourselves. For days, sometimes weeks before I lead a Dance, I consciously tune into the Spirit of Guidance, dedicating myself and the circle that will gather to our highest good and the highest good of all, listening to the helpful whispers of the Beloved—what season of the year, or traditional teaching, or approaching holy day, or recent monumental event may be presenting itself to my inner world? What dear familiar Dances are singing in my being? What Dances are coming up that need a bit of a review of the write-up? What recently-learned Dances are calling me to dive deeper into their ocean of truth? I seldom make a written list, but instead continue to open more and more to the flow of wisdom that always seems to come, allowing myself to be imprinted and impregnated with the unique Message for

this particular circle—which includes me—trusting that when the time comes, the perfect unfolding will occur. I do also prepare the physical space. Depending on inspiration and logistics, this might mean a picture, a flower, and an unscented candle, maybe a prayer flag or two, or my favorite small statue of Kwan Yin. Sometimes with an unfamiliar group or in an unfamiliar location it may just mean that I wear or carry my prayer beads. At our local community Dance meetings, and in special Dance gatherings and retreats far and wide, I've experienced some stunningly beautiful, artful altars and decorations, created with love, creativity, and devotion, which powerfully contribute to shared Sacred Space, a kiss of blessing to all who see them. So find something that creates Sacred Space for you, and use it to prepare the shared space beforehand. This may change over time, or each time. No matter how simple or small, always have a tangible object of blessing in the Dance space whenever possible.

2. Clear. I've always loved the walking meditation/preparation before the Dance begins that is traditional in our neck of the woods and in many Dance communities I've had the good fortune to visit. This is a welcome opportunity to clear away the sometimes nagging concerns and irksome preoccupations that may be lurking consciously or unconsciously, to release tension from the beloved body-child, to soften, to relax into the relief of the Eternal Now. This walk is guided by the Dance leader and usually includes awareness of the breath, the feet, and the heart. Often I include awareness of the Earth-Mother we walk upon, and of the heavens, Sky-Father, and the top of the head opening to the cosmos like a thousand-petaled lotus. I clear myself as we walk, allowing all else but the present moment to fall away more and more, step by step, breath by breath. I notice any impressions that occur of what else to offer for clearing, honoring what may be arising in those gathered. For several years, I led a Friday night Dance meeting, an extremely challenging time of the week, with people often exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally by the long workweek just past. It felt like Dancing in molasses. One night I was inspired to share Murshid SAM's Elemental Walks for the opening walk and it made a *huge* difference, re-balancing our beings and centering our energies. I opened that Dance with the Elemental Walks every time after that. Certainly an opening walk is not the only way to clear. I've experienced powerful group clearing through a devotional song led by the Dance leader. Traditional seated or walking meditation is a proven clearing practice. Even just holding hands in a circle and breathing together consciously can be tremendously valuable. Usually, what helps you clear yourself will help others too.

3. Invoke. One definition of “invoke” is “to call for with earnest desire.” What do you earnestly desire for the Dancers in the circle? For yourself? For the world? Find a way to invoke this desire with your voice and/or body, in and with the circle joining together in invocation—a prayer, a chant, a poem, a shared movement or *mudra* (sacred gesture/pose). For me, Hazrat Inayat Khan's Invocation of Peace expresses this earnest call perfectly and powerfully—“Toward the One...United with All...”

4. Listen. As Dance after Dance and truth after truth deepens and expands the Sacred Space, we find ourselves in a cauldron of transformation. The Dance circle becomes Rumi's cooking pot that boils the chick peas, giving us flavor so we can be a “lovely vitality.” Heaven opens above us. Earth blossoms and ripens beneath us. We Dance with and inside the Beloved. Our greatest work as Dance leaders is to stay grounded in midst of this bliss, centered, listening intently with all our senses—outer and inner. We listen for what about this Dance or spiritual tradition wants to be expressed by way of introduction. Within the Dance, we listen for the next change: softer, faster, on the breath. We listen for when the Dance is drawing to a close and which is the final repetition. We listen for which Dance comes next. We listen for the echoes of each sacred phrase or Sacred Name in our own inner canyons. We listen for whatever the Spirit of Guidance presents as useful for this wholly unique moment. Being in “doing mind” rather than “thinking mind” enables us to best serve the stream of inspiration that is always fully present whenever we listen for it.

5. Appreciate. No matter what happens in the Dance circle, feel gratitude, breathe gratitude for the exquisite opportunity to be of service through the Dances of Universal Peace to whatever extent is

possible in this moment. As Moineddin Jablonski so wisely said to the young Saadi Neil Douglas-Klotz, “Sometimes your worst is good enough.” Mother Teresa described her work among the lepers as ministering to Christ in his distressing disguises. When we’re upset because things don’t go the way we want, it’s simply the Divine in a distressing disguise, gifting us with an opportunity to learn a wonderful new truth about ourselves and our world. In the face of my concerns about this or that as a developing Dance leader, my Dance Mentor would say to me what his Dance Mentor had said to him, “Give God all the undeserved blame, and give God all the undeserved praise.” Even when it’s pure magic, it’s because of pure grace, and so another opportunity for profoundest thankfulness. Heart-felt appreciation supports and continues Sacred Space because it helps us relinquish the erroneous thought that it was something we did ourselves, and instead points to the true Source of All Good.

The word “worship” comes from the root “worth.” Worship can be seen as a pilgrimage to essential worth, “the pearl of greatest price,” including our own essential worth. Every Dance circle certainly is this pilgrimage. One translation of the last words of the Prophet Mohammed is “There are as many ways to God as there are mortal breaths.” (Tamam Kahn) In the Dances, we can experience viscerally phenomenal truths from the many ways there are of human worship, sharing each others’ prayers and names for Sacred Unity, attuning to the collective vibrations of millions of worshipers over thousands of years. No wonder the Dances change lives and transform hearts and minds year after year, decade after decade! Yes, the Dances are fun, and there is such a thing as Sacred Silliness, but there are so many other ways to have fun and be silly without bending the Dances into this shape. Certainly it is powerful for people to share a sacred phrase and move their bodies together, even as an entertainment. But how much more powerful for us to endeavor to hold the Dances of Universal as Sacred Space, providing a vehicle for “the peace that passes understanding” to come to us and through us.

So Mote It Be!

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