

Dances of Exile and Homecoming

Dances of exile and homecoming - Armenian, Rom, Jewish, Kurdish, Assyrian, Bulgarian, Greek – come from people who have suffered the tragedy of dispersion and exile. My search to understand the particular nostalgic quality which permeates them all has become a lifelong journey towards understanding both the hurt and the healing at the heart of human history.

‘A diaspora is defined by the role played by collective memory, which transmits both the historical facts that precipitated the dispersion and a cultural heritage.’ (*Penguin Atlas of Diasporas*) To keep a cultural identity alive outside the nourishing environment of one’s homeland, memory must recreate essential aspects of the homeland: religion, language, food, music and dance. So, for diaspora peoples, music and dance are not solely celebrational; they must also serve to keep memory alive. When the memories are painful, the joy of the music becomes bittersweet. This dual quality is key to understanding dances of exile and homecoming. The Assyrians say that the homeland comes to life again underneath the feet of the dancers – this is a miracle which defies reason, yet nevertheless it is the experience of those who have lost all there is to lose and still find that something tangible remains. This reality is contained in Hilde Domin’s keynote phrase: „Ich setzte den Fuß in die Luft und sie trug“.

Visible/ invisible, lost / regained; the sustained dance of pairs of opposites lead the way to understanding of exile and homecoming. Somehow, through acknowledging the worst of human experience – the pain of exile – these dances manage also to invoke the best of human experience: the quality of compassion. As well as the duality of pain and compassion, these dances contain both joy and sorrow, loss and gratitude, passion and detachment, harmoniously yet with great intensity. In my own cultural upbringing, such feelings were systematically split apart from one another, which perhaps explains why my heart yearns for their reconciliation, mediated by dances with roots very different from my own. These ‘opposite’ energies, far from conflicting, actually serve one another: yearning contains the key to its own fulfilment, and longing brings to itself unimaginable love. What a paradox! How can the greatest suffering become the key to the greatest joy? One does not exist without the other. This mysterious truth defies language, yet has been hinted at repeatedly by the mystics of the world. In the sublime words of Rumi, the Sufi saint of the thirteenth century:

*The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.
Your pure sadness
that wants help
is the secret cup.*

This nostalgia finds wordless expression in the musical art of *taksim*, or improvisation, central to many musical styles of Eastern Europe and the Near East. The art of *taksim* can be heard by the soul as a prayer, both a journey into the unknown, and a guided return, whose anticipated sweetness is directly defined by the intensity of the separation.

This blend of sweetness and strength, sacredness and sensuality in both the music and the dance, can help us recognise how we have been exiled from our bodies, and reconcile the culturally imposed and psychologically internalised opposites at the source of our separation from ourselves. Dances which encourage us to move our hips, thighs, pelvis and belly are the ones that show us the road home. In the amazing tenderness they ask of us, and the way they require our constant attention to the sole's careful placement on the ground, these dances patiently help us, over and over, to be in touch with the earth beneath our feet. One step at a time, we can become more aware and more accepting of our own bodies, which in turn connects us to the inner ground, both a physiological and a psychological support. Anatomically, the pelvic floor offers gravity, solidity and security, and serves as the foundation and springboard for all our body movement. In women the pelvis also holds the buried treasure of the cervix, the strongest muscle in the human body. Inwardly dancing on this hidden foundation is indeed a way of taking a step not on the ground but which holds.

The Greek / Macedonian Rom dance Yeeftos Yeni Yol is a good map of this journey into the inner homeland of the dancing body. When I first heard this music (from the live recording by Makis Christodoupoulos "I Diki Mas I Tsingani") ten years ago, the rhythm, tempo and emotion in Eleni Vitali's incredible voice, guided me to dance to it with the steps of the Macedonian Rom dance Jeni Jol. I found out later how exactly the text mirrored my instinctive experience of both the music and the dance. "I have no country, I have no hope / No nation would miss me / Yet with my hands and my heart / I build tents in my dreams / And our legs, when they dance, / In the perfumes which enchant you / Make bodies move... / And enfold you in their embrace." Like a tent, the body is but a temporary home, made for travelling, all we have in this life. This truth, by shattering our illusions about identity, possession and belonging, is the means of our exile from all that we could hope to acquire in this life. And yet the body itself, by the sacred act of dancing, leads us fully into the true homeland, giving us the great gift of daring to dance our sensuality in the world.

In Western industrial culture, we have lost much of our sensuality, sexuality, strength, and beauty, or more precisely, we have lost our freedom to fully embody these aspects of our nature without fear and without shame. From the depths of such an exile, it can be difficult to imagine how to return home, but the dances show us the way. By simply dancing, we can take the movements into the depths of our own bodies, move from within and begin to express what has been locked inside. The exquisite beauty, formidable strength, passionate sensuality, loving self-acceptance and self-confidence that then begin to emerge are among the most priceless treasures of the journey of homecoming. Paradoxically, I believe it is the fact of our original exile that enables us to truly value these gifts once we rediscover them, as if we must endure a period of alienation and exile before we can know what it is to be fully at home with ourselves and our bodies.

Not every people has been forced into diaspora, but every soul knows longing, and everyone has some tale of loss and exile to tell, whether from a great historical movement like diaspora or simply from the inevitable marks and scars left by basic life experiences. That we can sometimes be transformed and liberated through these painful experiences, like the phoenix rising from the ashes, instead of simply being burned, is one of the greatest gifts and mysteries of being human.

This mystery is further deepened by the fact that people living through any diaspora may find that their survival is enabled precisely *because* they have been scattered to distant lands, which ultimately have proved safer than the lost lands of home. Similarly, many of the traditional dances we love may no longer thrive in their original villages, but as they are remembered and kept alive in dance groups all over the planet, their survival is to some degree thereby ensured.

Sadly, the tragedies of diaspora, forced exile, and genocide remain ever-present in our human family. Even if this suffering does not intrude into our own neighbourhoods, the commonplace patterns which enable it – intolerance, race hatred, nationalism, and fear of those who are different – are all around us, and to a certain extent inside each of us, all the time. Our conscious work with dance can indeed undermine these deadly patterns, in small, personal yet important ways. Just as we open our hearts to the dances which seek shelter and survival, we need to open our homes to our brothers and sisters in the human family who are forced to flee their own homes. Who knows? It may be that we are only here in this life because someone, somewhere in a distant past, did this for our own ancestors. Or it may be that one day, we might have to call upon others to do the same for us.

We are lucky, most of us, to be alive in a time and place where freedom of speech is taken for granted, and where speaking out against injustice does not (yet) require risking our lives. As we receive inspiration and healing from the dances of the disenfranchised peoples of the world, I hope that eventually we may translate our compassion into action, by daring to stand up against racism in all its forms. In addition to making the world safer, when we speak up for the cast-off members of our human family, we symbolically reclaim cast-off parts of ourselves and so come closer to spiritual and psychological wholeness. Hope for our children's world lies in the seeds that can thus be planted through our inner work with the dance. And hope for the dances themselves lies with our own efforts to preserve them, as best we can, as they make their way to us through their own worldwide dispersal.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to all my teachers and all those who have helped me to know intimately the landscape of my own exile, and to find inside it the road home. I would like to dedicate this work to the memory of all homeless wanderers, in times past and in times to come.

*...This is your body,
your greatest gift,
pregnant with wisdom you do not hear,
grief you thought was forgotten,
and joy you have never known.
Body work is soul work.
Imagination is the bridge
between body and soul.*

Marion Woodman