

# My Initiation into Women's Dances

When I first encountered Sacred Dance and folk dance in 1985, I was not particularly attuned to women's dances. A few entered my repertoire, but I had no conscious understanding of what might make them special. Plunging voraciously into the circle dance world, I was mostly interested in going to lots of workshops and learning as many dances as possible. By the time I was twenty, I was teaching at several groups and performing in a folklore ensemble. Then one day, leaping and stamping through an energetic Lebanese men's dance, I tore cartilage in my left knee. Specialists said I would never dance again.

The doctors were wrong, because my knee did heal, without surgery. Dancing remained my passion and became my profession. But in a way, they were right, because some dances I never did dance again. Lebanese men's dances, for instance, went right out the window. Restricted by my recovering knee to quieter, slower dances - which up to then I had tended to find a little boring - my unsuspecting initiation into the world of women's dances began.

Super-fast dances were off-limits, but I could still safely dance simple yet powerful patterns like the Pravo. Even with fewer steps, a more constrained style and limited range of movement, these dances strangely drew my full attention. In the absence of challenging steps or tricky variations to distract me from myself, they created a trancelike atmosphere which I had not experienced in more complex choreographies. The Greeks say a slow dance is more difficult than a fast one: as in meditation, I had to be present - in myself, in my body and in the world - in a way that was very simple, yet at times unbearable. Finding out how to do this was essential to my healing process, because the breakdown of my knee had also precipitated an inner breakdown, in the form of a clinical depression.

Many of the dances which sustained me through my long recovery belonged to the three-measure dance family (like Pravo, Chocek and Jeni Jol), the most widespread dance pattern of the Balkans and Near East. In time, my intuition guided me to view this pattern, the oldest surviving circle dance, as an encoded expression of the ancient Tree of Life, and therefore of the Great Mother Goddess whose image was originally identified with the Tree in the same geographical area (for more on this theme, see Laura's article Simple Dances in *Kreise Ziehen* 3/98). Then it was as if the countless hours spent dancing them had served to truly invoke the Goddess in my life, because suddenly, more and more women's dances were coming my way.

They came bearing gifts: a strong element of honouring the earth and the cycles of life, and a vital connection to the grandmothers of the human family who gave us the dances. I slowly began to perceive their living and loving presence in these ancient patterns, whispering wisdom from the distant past which easily translated into practical advice for my daily life. They opened up a limitless source of healing, and wove me back into the web of life which depression had cut me away from. They made themselves known to me as living beings, with history, purpose and a life much larger and longer than my own.

As women's dances gently yet firmly invited me back into my body, I learned through extensive travels in the Balkans how the restrained yet supportive style of women's folk dance is directly related to the physical restraint and support of women's folk dress. A circle of women, unified by costume or by a mastery of dance style, creates a synchrony of movement that allows each dancer to feel deeply held. This visual, kinesthetic and physical unity transcends discord; competition and conflict are transmuted into co-creation. For me this discovery was a godsend, as these dances seemed able to simultaneously support my physical limitations and contain my inner chaos.

During this time, my mentor Zuleikha gave me what I call the 'five-times practice': 'If you want to teach a dance, first dance it five times in a row, every day, for twenty-one days.' This method revealed a slow, steady pathway deep into the world of simple dances and their hidden treasures. Dancing with sincerity and curiosity in this way gave the time necessary to savour and digest each dance. As with truly good food, I wanted to know where each dance comes from, how it can be safely transported and stored, and above all how it 'cooks' in the body as we dance, slowly, with awareness and repetition. These daily lessons of patience, accuracy, stamina, preservation, release and renewal, handed down from circle to circle for hundreds or even thousands of years, were both food and medicine to me. Of all the raw material I brought to the kitchen of this practice, women's dances provided the most delicious nourishment, for myself and for others.

Participants in workshops from Berlin to Findhorn, Tasmania to Stockholm, Las Vegas to Tierra del Fuego have described how women's dances connect them with a flow of energy in the circle and the body, waxing and waning like the cycles of life. Dancing the balance of complementary forces in the body allows us to fine-tune our own inner equilibrium, learning when to reserve energy and when to release it, when to yield and when to make a stand.

This energy is not a merely mental concept. Even when the dance movements are small, the heat which can fill the dancers is real, and the dancer who plugs into this source of energy will find herself revitalized rather than drained, no matter how long she dances. T'ai chi, chi gong, reiki and other ancient practices demonstrate the same phenomenon. Thus I have come to view dance as the ancient martial art of Balkan village women, a physical and spiritual training which goes back to the very roots of human civilization and to the healthy, sustainable worldview early European culture once held.

Many traditional dances invite this energy into the body via some kind of vertical vibration connecting earth and sky through the body, often with a constant bending of the knees. (It's worth noting that sixteen years after my initial injury, my knees have absolutely no problem doing these gentle yet vigorous movements for hours.) In Armenia, this knee movement is seen as a way to 'pump' the life force from the ground, exactly like pumping water, to bring it into the body and into the world. We so desperately need, now, for both women and men to become the public water-bearers of this sweet source of strength, and for the beauty and wisdom of these ancient dances to flourish again on our stricken

planet.

As Zuleikha says, there are 'different ways of becoming aware of the instructions that are coming to all of us all the time. This has been so in every tradition on the planet, and it's something that's available to all of us, like learning how to talk on the cosmic telephone, and receiving information that you need for everyday life."

Traditional women's dances come from cultures which have suffered and survived many times of crisis and upheaval. As my own experience taught me, these dances encode practical knowledge which can help to guide us through similarly troubled times. They remind us of the sacredness and simple joy of our connection with nature, community, the body and the cycles of Life. In the face of the complex challenges of life today, now is the time to renew our memories of this ancient wisdom, and bring it more fully and visibly into our world.

(c) Laura Shannon 2003