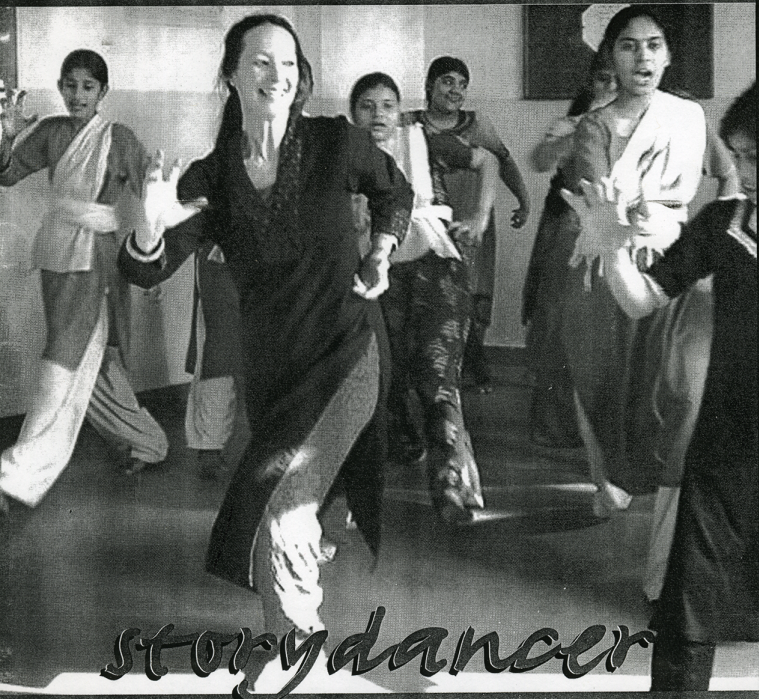


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*storydancer*

## STORYDANCER ZULEIKHA AND THE STORYDANCER PROJECT – ELDORADO SUN ARTICLE

Try to imagine these three settings: a public school gym filled with 400 students in rural New Mexico; the rooftop of a Muslim girls school in Delhi, India with 150 teenage girl students and women, many who come to school wearing burkhas; and the staff lunchroom at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. with women dressed in business clothes and heels. What do these places have in common?

All of these settings are part of The Storydancer Project. In 2000, international performer and storydancer, Zuleikha created a non-profit organization called The Storydancer Project. During Zuleikha's earlier training with exceptional international dance and music masters, she noticed the situation of women and health around the world. This became one of the seeds of inspiration for creating The Storydancer Project.

The Storydancer Project is an international artistic health resource program dedicated to bringing awareness of health and body through movement and melody to those in the world not able to receive these precious elements of life. These programs enable women, teenage girls and children to develop a more positive sense of themselves. This is grass roots work, which each girl, each woman, each child. *Shared joy produces powerful results*, states Zuleikha

Zuleikha is the recent recipient of the prestigious 2005 Humanitarian Award from Pediatric Nursing Journal, Janetti Publications, Inc. This award is presented to Zuleikha on behalf of her work with The Storydancer Project, helping women and children suffering from the trauma of war, disease, poverty and loss of family. Past recipients include Rosalyn Carter, Paul Newman and Marian Wright Edelman. Zuleikha is especially pleased that the award comes from nurses, individuals who have dedicated themselves to caring for the physical health of the population. She sees her work in the same vein. She's not simply teaching movement for performance (although she loves to perform) or even as dance (although she's a well-trained dancer who loves to dance) but to show people the possibilities in movements, as basic as standing or walking.

One of the programs of The Storydancer Project is located in the Nizamuddin Basti, a Muslim 12<sup>th</sup> century area of Delhi, India. *I work at the Hope Project*, Zuleikha explains, *with the children of the rag pickers. Rag pickers are the people who sort through the garbage and sell it to feed their families. It's a hands-on kind of recycling that a whole family takes part in. I also work with teenage girls, and the women in the community. These women are taking a genuine interest in their health. Because they live in a traditional Muslim community and in intense poverty with large families, it is difficult to find time to practice exercises. Each year the resolve of these women is growing stronger.* In the women's community sessions, we practice how to hold ourselves upright even beneath the burkha. Zuleikha demonstrates. She goes from being stooped over to holding her shoulders back squarely, with her head high and walking forward with pride and grace. Although this alteration may seem small in the big picture of the world, it can transform how a woman or girl feels about herself. In a sense, it's almost as revolutionary as a woman buying a cow to provide milk for her family or a girl going to school and learning to read. While this sense of empowerment is crucial for the very poor, Zuleikha recalls the same results in teaching upper class women in Afghanistan during her time of study there.

The Storydancer Project has ongoing programs around the world. Some of the sites include: Hope Project Charitable Trust, Delhi, India; CanSupport, Delhi, India; Peacemaker Circle and Holy Land Trust, Israel; Sri Yasodara Orphanage, Sri Lanka; and more.

Zuleikha also works with teenage girls and children in the U.S. Some of these places include John Hopkins' Children's Center and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

In another U.S. venue, the National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C, she was invited to collaborate with two schools of teenage girls to develop a dance theater performance called "Sketches from Her Story," dedicated to Women's History Month. The Smithsonian Institution sponsored this performance. Guided by Zuleikha, each girl chose an inspirational woman to explore through movement. As one member of the audience noted: *It was a celebration of women's storytelling and dance – empowering young women through dance – moving and magical.*

In Santa Fe, New Mexico, as an appointee to the Governor's Council for Health and Physical Fitness, Zuleikha developed a 15-minute minimalist guide to health and exercise for government employees in the west capital complex.

Growing up in a western classical music family, Zuleikha studied with avant-garde dance and movement pioneer, Anna Halprin in California. Halprin created a new body and movement therapy at her Tamalpa Institute; she used dance to develop a mythic language that attempted to speak about contemporary issues. After her experience with Halprin, Zuleikha encountered the music of Ali Akbar Khan and Ravi Shankar. She began studying Kathak dance at the Ali Akbar College of Music and Dance in San Francisco. Kathak is a rhythmic, classical, narrative dance form of India. While seeming very formal, this type of dance allows for improvisation. As a dancer, I immerse myself in the rhythm and music. And she adds, the whole thing is a living event. She studied music in Afghanistan, lived and danced in Bali and practiced movement

forms in Asia, dancing and teaching in the temples of Japan. In Bali, well known for its tradition of story-telling dance, Zuleikha was fortunate to study with great dance masters. Her work has taken her into the cultures of Russia, Japan, and the Czech Republic. Wherever she travels, Zuleikha gathers ideas and styles that she describes as 'intersecting, layered patches similar to a quilt.'

Zuleikha was an early participant in the New Mexico Artist-in-Residence program in the public schools. Even though Zuleikha first imagined that she would simply perform, she soon found herself in the middle of a school gymnasium or school cafeteria among hundreds of students. Zuleikha realized that she needed to adapt; she needed to find ways to immediately engage the audience. She felt it was important to share a sense of self-worth with these young people. This experience turned out to be a lot of fun and helped Zuleikha learn to work with different ages in diverse settings, while demonstrating the value of the creative movement process.

In Kabul, Afghanistan, Zuleikha lived and studied music and poetry with the great master, Ustad Hashim Chisti and his family of musicians. Her affection for this culture's musical and dance traditions is expressed in some of Zuleikha's collaborative performances using dance to embody the poetry of the Sufi poet Rumi, one of the mostly widely read poets in the world. Today, Zuleikha collaborates in performances throughout the country, with poet and translator of Rumi poetry, Coleman Barks and some fantastic world musicians. *The poetry of Rumi*, says Zuleikha, *gives permission to dance inside of the essence of love*. In December, Zuleikha will return to the Lensic Center for Performing Arts with The Rumi Concert: Rumi and Friends, collaborating with Robert Bly, Coleman Barks, David Darling and Jai Uttal. As Barks has stated, *Zuleikha has done a new and probably ancient thing: she has woven the arts of storytelling, dance, poetry, and music together again*.

Zuleikha is constantly creating a contemporary rhythmic language, which embodies an expressive form of spontaneity and improvisation through movement. Many of Zuleikha's comments remind me of a Rumi poem. As she stated in an interview with Parvati Markus called 'The Dancer is in The Dance:' *I want to ride the wind when I dance. Sometimes I ride inside the wind, the inner wind of my spirit. I run on silent feet. My spine slides like a reptile around the floor remembering its ancient manners. My eyes are closed, seeing each movement shift from the inside. I ride this calmness and I move through space, finding lightness in the seeming darkness. There is no idle chatter in the mind. Moment by moment passes in this calmly ecstatic darkness. Dance has fallen by the wayside and movement-by-movement has arrived*.

Up and coming, Zuleikha will be performing in 2006 at the Sacred River Celebration, presented by Ahilya Fort at Maheshwar, India. It is unique for a western dancer to be invited to participate in a classical Indian festival of dance and music. She has also been invited by the Lied Center for Performing Arts and Midland Lutheran College, as artist-in-residence, to teach and perform her one-woman concert in Lincoln, Nebraska. At the end of 2005 and beginning of 2006, Zuleikha continues the work of The Storydancer Project around the world. [www.storydancer.com](http://www.storydancer.com).

While this array of situations may seem very different, Zuleikha is always struck by the commonality of needs and interests that each opportunity offers. In her opinion, music and dance are a way of reaching the universal and then bringing this feeling into the present moment. As she remarks, *I dance with the hope that every heart can find a way into joy and gratitude, again and again*.