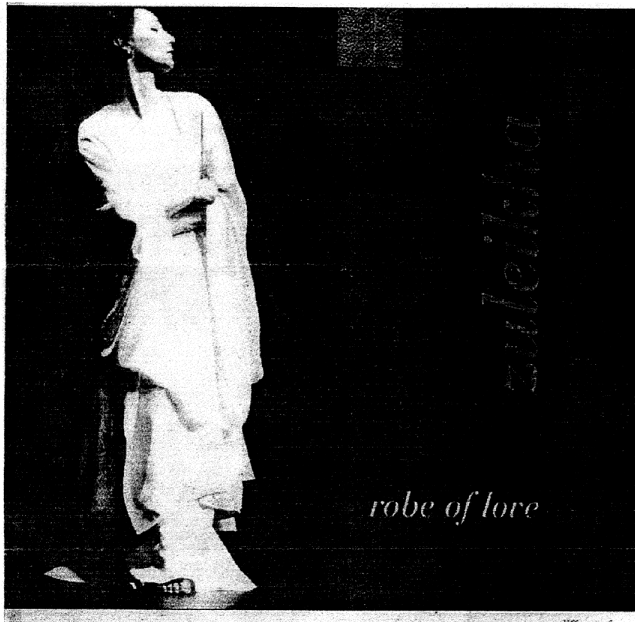


# Living

## Spirituality



Zuleikha, shown here on the cover of her album, *Robe of Love*, offers movement workshops that "strip away the veil that seems to separate the everyday world from the sacred world of religious experience."

## Portals to the Sacred

by John F. Luca

**I**s there a way to the sacred? If so, how does one get from the here of everyday life to the there of the sacred? Is this a rare journey reserved only for saints and mystics like Ramakrishna, St. Teresa of Avila, and Meister Eckhart? Or is the path to a direct experience of the divine also open to you and me? Is it possible that there is, in fact, no distance to be traveled, not really, just a stopping, a resting, a paying attention, and a dropping into the sacred and the sacred into us? Does any of this make sense? Maybe it's a matter of seeing deeply and clearly what is in and around us all the time.

Is it possible we're in the promised land and we know it not? Are we ignoring messages of the sacred all the time? In this age of science and rationalism have we unnaturally, unimaginatively, and unnecessarily closed down to the possibility of the transcendent in our lives?

On a weekend in June, Pacifica Graduate Institute of Carpinteria held a conference, "Portals to the Sacred through Depth Psychology," where 200 therapists and interested others from around the country came together to listen to faculty and invited lecturers share their insights, experiences, and research into these questions and ways that

the sacred—or as the depth psychologists at Pacifica say, the "numinous"—directly affects us through poetry, prayer, psychotherapy, dreams, relationships, grief, creativity, and non-ordinary states of consciousness.

Dr. Lionel Corbett of Pacifica Graduate Institute in his keynote presentation discussed how our direct experience of the sacred in ways specific to our own psychic makeup could serve as the foundation on which to base a spirituality and religion that would speak to us in a deep and vital way. Many people do not take seriously the possibility that they can and do have firsthand experience of the spiritual mystery of life, and feel they must accept these things secondhand, possibly accepting established religious teachings that do not touch their souls.

"That couldn't happen to me," they say. "I'm not holy enough, special enough, deep enough. That's only for those handpicked by God, not for the likes of horribly imperfect me." Maybe this belief in the extraordinariness of mystical or numinous experience disconnects us—as much as anything does—from the experience of the sacred.

Throughout most of recorded history and long before, the vast majority of humanity experienced the world as enlivened by some

unseen Great Spirit who gave it ultimate meaning. Only in the very recent past have many of us been disconnected from this vision of reality. Maybe it's time to reclaim our right to experience the world as profoundly meaningful and our lives and ourselves as enmeshed in a sacred web.

The possibility of the experience of the sacred in our lives is

very different from the actual experience itself. A number of the conference lecturers—conscious of this distinction—read poetry, played music, or included art in their presentations, hoping to create a setting in which we could begin to walk through the sacred forest toward the home of the Friend.

The story weaver, dream-dancer, trance-mistress Zuleikha, through her workshop, "The Landscape of Sacred Space: Experiencing the Numinous through the Portal of Embodiment," and her performance, "Storydancer and the Gateless Gate," really stripped away the veil that seems to separate the everyday world from the sacred world of religious experience. Zuleikha, with classical eastern music and gentle guidance in the art of allowing the body/soul to dance its prayer, took me and a hundred others by the hand, foot, elbow, shoulder, back, the top of the head, the eye and the ear, and led us dancing into the Garden of the Divine.

Zuleikha, who has taught, trained, and performed in the U.S., Afghanistan, Bali, and the temples of Japan, has worked with musicians and dancers from around the world. She has collaborated with Coleman Barks, the poet and foremost translator of the poetry of the Persian mystical poet, Rumi. Her body is her instrument. She plays it and it plays her. She is waif thin, a reed whose ribs and bones shape the surface of her face and torso. Her eyes and skin reach out into the room. Though she is small—I can't imagine she weighs 100 pounds—and can disappear into her body like a bat folding its wings, she can, as one woman commented, grow right before your eyes. Then shrink. Then grow.

"The land that we live in," she says as she begins her workshop, "is now beginning to be ready to feel. We're not content just to think."

Since before Plato, we in the West have been admonished to transcend the ways of the flesh and seek the subtler ways of the spirit through the mind, through reason. But Zuleikha does not accept the sharp separation between body and spirit. Her way is not to transcend the body, but to drop deeply into the body. Not to go out, but to go in. And by going deeply into the body we find housed there that which many have sought outside themselves.

"Our society doesn't tell us to be embodied, to be in our bodies," she says. "It tells us to work out our body. Work out. We don't get into the first grade and start learning about breathing, sitting, walking, and being. And this whole thing doesn't work without being. That's the problem. We learned to masquerade what life should look like without experiencing the essence of being, which is our life's energy. Throughout the day, we're going to do a number of exercises as an experiment, and you can enter the laboratory of the unknown. We're going to have a little adventure into some different awarenesses of who we are in the body."

Traditional eastern music begins. Zuleikha dances and strikes poses as she continues to instruct us. She tells us to imagine we can zap bolts of energy through our palms into the space around us, and then tells us to move as we wish and to spark the air as we do so.

Over the next two hours, a hundred people will move around the room following her instructions, but each person will move in his or her own unique way.

"There are no rules," she says. "You have to follow the tracks that pull at your being."

I hesitate to use the word "dance." The experience is more like water coursing over an unseen landscape. There's a nonverbal experience of being played like an instrument, or speaking a language that the reasoning mind doesn't exactly grasp. It feels like praying. Like why we're here. Like what we should be doing more often, rather than spending our days as if we were ants whose sole purpose in the cosmos is to build a few more chambers in an ever-growing anthill.

The timeless time I spent with Zuleikha made me feel, as she said, quoting Rumi, that "a meeting with the Friend is the only real reason for doing anything." ■