

# Sacred Journey

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## **Zuleikha — The Dancer is in the Dance** as told to Parvati Markus

### **Dance**

I was taught in the East that music is a science of three parts, singing is the first; the next is playing an instrument; then comes the rhythmic art of ecstasy, which we call dance.

What makes me want to dance? -- the impulse of such feeling that I have to express my heart. Once I step into the heart of my feeling, a journey begins, and each dance takes me home in a new way. For me, dancing is a practice of entering and living in this field of where-I-know-not. Over time I have begun to recognize the terrain of the unknown. Some days I begin in rhythm, others in melody. Sometimes I feel loss, other times anger. Some days I feel heavy, as if I cannot dance. I have come to understand that these are all entry points into the vast spaciousness of cosmic awareness.

I simply love to dance. What I know is that the invitation to dance, when actually accepted, is liberating. The permission to move creates relief from the oppression that occurs in separation. Inhabiting a physical body on earth is what we know. When this body ceases to be alive with the beating heart, this we have termed 'death.' I do not know much about death, except that when I am dancing, the term "precious gift of human birth" becomes a holy relevance, and I can remember my own connection to the fountain of life essence.

I've been performing in many places around the world, and what's extraordinary is the way in which human beings can understand each other. Dance is such a



universal language, everyone can relate to what I am doing. Dancing is a way of letting the love in. Dancing is a way of letting the child-likeness of the eternal soul play; a way to let the soul speak to the being in the body. Dancing is a way to let the body speak with the Spirit; a way for Spirit to sing in the airwaves. Dancing is a way of expression for every body. It is not a certain step or a correct way of moving, but it is when, as David says in the Psalms, "My cup runneth over."

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.

## **Art**

The ancients knew that movement with devotion promoted a kind of enthusiasm for life as an expression of the highest potential. In all ancient cultures, movement or dance was a way of expressing thankfulness.

As the I Ching says, "Reverence is the foundation of true culture." A true culture embraces art as offering.

I always wondered at the word 'art.' "I wonder who Art is? I'd like to meet this guy," I'd say, and everyone would laugh. One day I was walking in some ruins in New Mexico with a friend. Jokingly, I asked her, "How

art thou?" Then I heard what I had said and realized that 'art' was a verb, which meant 'to be.' I understood that to be an artist meant being a person who was in the process of Being. To share being-ness through form - whether it is music, poetry, prose, movement, painting, cooking, gardening -- the way-of-being is what we call 'art.'

Actually, art is meditation in process. Sitting still and watching your mind is one way of going about it, watching your hand move through space is the exact same thing. I have spent many years studying different techniques of inner work, and I find that my dancing is enhanced by that work and that dancing is inner work. When people come to work with me, they're expansive; their hearts open; they feel happy; they feel joyful, even if they've cried a lot. And miracles happen. Every time a person says "yes" to the inner place that wants to express the Great Unknown, it's a miracle. The world of possibilities opens up.

## **Stories**

Kathak known as the Theater of the Divine, comes from the word katha which means "to tell stories." It was brought into being by the great rishis (sages) who received the laws of nature, all the comments and teachings about movement from Shiva, the Lord of the Dance. The old rishis taught that theater is for the purpose of teaching, that through these stories the play of light and dark is portrayed, and the witness, or audience, is the receiver of this wisdom. In this way, stories have been used to preserve the memory of the People from the beginning of time. It is this memory that much of my own dance work seeks to serve: the memory of greater love in its manifestation through the



mirrors of all the aspects of the Creative.

When I first saw kathak dance, I saw a dancer enter a holy state and then tell the old stories of India. These stories captivated by being and showed me how life is. It was through these stories that my own stories began to have greater meaning. I began to understand that the mirror of the teaching stories appeals to children of all ages and that the work has to do with remembering these teachings. Inside the stories are all the different 'spiritual states.' or what I would call states of learning. Every character is somebody in me. That lazy girl who doesn't want to help her mother, that's me. That mother who's going to cook, that's me too. When I learn stories, I have to face myself. I want to be able to bring that kind of "Ah-ha" to people, because that's what stories do for me.

## **Whirling**

I've always whirled. It's not something I learned later in life. It's something I've done every since I can remember. It's something children do. When I'm spinning, I'm cupping the air, putting it out, bringing it in, lifting it up with one hand, putting it into the earth with the other hand. I'm receiving and giving out. When I'm turning, there aren't any questions; I feel purely what movement means. I feel the utter silence - the stillness of the center of the Great Heart.

The breath provides the rhythm that creates the state of awareness. The word spirit means breath; through the breath, the feeling of devotion is remembered. To expire is to stop breathing; to inspire is to infuse with the breath, with spirit. Often those who do meditation practices, when they get "in the spirit" want to close

their eyes, sit down, and go to the place of the quiet breath. But you can also do that while moving. Ecstasy and dance can be the same thing when you've taught your body to pay attention the way you do with your eyes closed.

## **Sacred**

People go to seminars and workshops where they talk and share and meditate to reach the sacred, but will rarely use their bodies to access the experience of the sacred, the ecstasy. One of the functions of dance is to praise, to give thanks. When I see a person doing that, it moves me to tears. That's sacred. As the years have gone on, I've discovered that 'sacred' dance means so many different things to people, so I have gone back to nature as the common denominator. When we align ourselves and stand in nature, we feel what purity is. A pine tree in the wind is itself a holy event. And that, to me, is sacredness.

Zuleikha spent many years studying kathak dance and music at the Ali Akbar College of Music in San Francisco, with teachers in Afghanistan and Bali. She has taken the cultural and artistic practices of East and West and transfigured them - cross-pollinating dance, music, storytelling, humor and spiritual wisdom into a form uniquely her own. She teaches workshops and performs concerts around the world, both as a solo performer and in ensemble with world musicians and poets.

Parvati Markus is a freelance writer and nonfiction book editor in Santa Fe, NM. A devotee of Neem Karoli Baba (the "Maharaj-ji" of Be Here Now, she has lived and studied in India. She is also an award-winning photographer, mother of two sons and novelist.

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