

Surrender to the dance

By Souds True

ST: Gabrielle, you're known as "the woman who inspires people to dance." How is ecstatic dance, the tradition that you teach, different from other forms of dance ?

Gabrielle Roth: Dance is often taught as an art based on controlling the body – "Do this step after that step ; move the hand this way or the hips that way." With ecstatic dance, the focus is on letting movement flow organically. In my workshops and on my new Ecstatic Dance videos, I teach a series of practices called "The Wave." They allow you to tune in to the universal rhythms that underlie all of life. In the process, you fall deeper and deeper into yourself as a source of movement. You learn how to find your own creative wellspring and surrender to that energy within you. You discover how you move as opposed to how I move. That's what fascinates me – that when we really strip down to the bare bones, each of us is an amazing ecstatic dancer. And the expression of that is completely unique. I've never seen two people do exactly the same dance when they've totally surrendered to being an expression of the flow of their own energies.

ST: The phrase "ecstatic dance" seems to be promising a lot. What do you mean by "ecstasy" ?

GR: Ecstasy is simply a timeless, egoless state of being. With ecstatic dance, you could go five days and not experience that state. On another day, you could zip right into this blissful state of consciousness as easily as slipping through an open gate. It's like being a surfer. You go out there and you never know when the big wave is going to come and carry you on this amazing journey. But you go out there every day. You don't expect to get into an ecstatic state of consciousness every time you do it, but that potential for ecstasy will always be there.

ST: Aside from this feeling, which really sounds wonderful, how does ecstatic dance affect us ?

GR: I think that as Westerners, we're pretty far away from our bodies. We don't really inhabit ourselves in a deep and profound way. Many of us are frightened of our bodies, and of the energies stored within them. It's a fear that says, "Oh no, what will happen when I move ?" What happens in the dance is that all of that energy starts to be released. And people discover that it's not a scary thing after all, that in fact it's emancipating. As that energy starts to move, it dissipates, and we are left free and fluid.

ST: Your Ecstatic Dance video series, especially the Power Wave session, can be used as a very intense physical workout. But unlike other workout programs, the focus is not on getting "slim and sculpted." Why not ?

GR: I think that our Western attitude toward body weight creates “weight” on another level – the burden of hating our bodies that so many of us carry around. In *Sweat Your Prayers*, I wrote about a friend of mine who went to sit on top of Mount Tamalpais on her fortieth birthday. She sat there looking back at her twenties and thirties and had a realization : that she’d spent the past two decades trying to lose the same ten pounds. I said to her, “Why don’t you just embrace those ten pounds and just dance and dance and dance some more ? If they’re meant to drop off, they will. And if not, you’ll know that they’re part of you – and that they were probably part of your mother and your grandmother – and maybe you should just love those ten pounds and, you know, ‘work them, girl!’ ”. So, what’s most important is to accept yourself – to embrace, embody, and embellish the body and spirit that you possess. If you dance in this tradition, you will reach your natural and healthy weight, and you’ll be “fit” in more than just a physical sense.

ST: On the Inner Wave session, you start by saying, “The quickest way to still the mind is to move the body.” Can you explain?

GR: Well, you can sit and watch your mind and hope that it will shut up. “Good luck!” is what I say to that. That’s like telling yourself, “I will not think of a pink elephant.” But, what if you start moving your body and paying attention to the beat and the rhythm and the energy ? Everything starts to shift. The mind quiets down organically and naturally – without any intention to

slow down. And suddenly you're not thinking or preoccupied anymore. So the dance is a kind of a sneaky way to quiet the mind, like coming in through the back door.

ST: Some people refer to your work with ecstatic dance as a spiritual practice. Do you think of it that way ?

GR: For me, it's a spiritual event every time I dance because it is mindful movement. I seek to be vulnerable, surrendered, totally alive in the moment, connected to my core. In that surrender, I move closer to the energy that moves through everything, that keeps us all alive and moving. I just learn to let it move me, as opposed to myself or my ego moving me. And, that brings me closer to whatever I have ever thought of as God.