

# The Dancing Path

“Conscious Dancer” Article, 2008.

Each of us is a moving center, a space of divine mystery. And though we spend most of our time on the surface in the daily details of ordinary existence, most of us hunger to connect to this space within, to break through to ecstatic states of consciousness, to be swept away.

As a young dancer, I made the transition from the world of steps and structures to the world of transformation and trance by exposure to live drumming. The beats, the patterns, the rhythms kept calling me deeper and deeper into trance. These dances took me from the edge of myself to the moving center. And from there, I began to discover a more essential me.

Being young, wild and free, it didn't dawn on me that in order to go into these deep ecstatic places, I would have to be willing to transform absolutely everything that got in my way. That included every form of inertia known to us: the physical inertia of tight and stressed muscles; the emotional baggage of depressed, repressed feelings; the mental baggage of dogmas, attitudes and philosophies. In other words, I'd have to let it all go.

In a parallel universe, I was teaching movement to tens of thousands of people and, in them, I began to witness my own body/spirit split. Between the head and feet of any given person is a billion miles of unexplored wilderness. I yearned to know

what was going on in that wilderness, not only in me, but in everyone else as well. It was clear that everything we think we know about who we are is located in the chat room above our necks.

What I have learned so far is that to answer the question, “What does it mean to be a human being?” we need to defer to our feet and move back to our roots. These roots are made of light that connects us to 75,000 years of ecstatic dance tradition, to all who have danced to transport themselves out of their heads into the wilderness of their own psyches to experience, in poetic patterns, the shape of their souls.

Movement became both my medicine and my meditation. Having found and healed myself in its wild embrace, I became a mapmaker for others to follow, but not in my footsteps, in their own. I began to observe patterns that connected us, and I eventually named them—Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical, and Stillness—and thus began my lifelong apprenticeship to the 5Rhythms.

The 5Rhythms were born in dialogue with the great emptiness I found in my dance when I moved to the edge of myself and leapt without knowing where I was going or why. They were my language, my way to communicate all that I was experiencing, feeling, seeing. They came to me in the night, in the sweat of

dreams, in the dance that never stopped moving, in the peak of an orgasm, in the prayer of childbirth; they came to me raw in their silence, they came to me in waves that washed over me and emptied me and filled me with their aliveness, their presence, their spirit.

My dance has become so much bigger than me, it has evolved into a language that liberates the body from all its shackles, a prayer for freedom, a way to self-realization, an art form for the disenchanting and disenfranchising to reclaim themselves, to resurrect and reinvent, and to take themselves back from the fringes of freaky times. We are looking for a beat, something solid and rooted where we can take refuge and begin to explore the fluidity of being alive, to investigate why so many of us are stuck, numb, spaced-out, tense, inert, and unable to stand up or sit down or unscramble the screens that reflect our collective insanity. And thus a body of work born in the sixties is now maturing into a contemporary movement practice that is planting its roots and spreading its wings into communities all over the world.

Through the 5Rhythms we discover our shamanic feet—feet that listen to the earth and are moved by her song. We discover our hearts in our hips, and a huge holiness in our heads and hands that reach out from our roots. We discover the spirit moving us, each of us, all of us. For me, god is both the dance and the

dancer. I am just the part that gets in the way. Getting in the way takes too much effort. So, I created a practice rooted in surrender. Egos hate surrender. The 5Rhythms are a threat to the ego as they can't be mastered or controlled. They teach us how to move through our insecurity, self-consciousness and fear into fascinating, unpredictable, spontaneous, authentic beings. They demand that we be original; they shatter us and center us simultaneously. They are for those willing to sweat their prayers. Prayer is moving. Prayer is offering your bones back to the dance. Prayer is letting go of everything that impedes our inner silence.

Each rhythm is a dynamic state of being, each one a master teacher. Together, they guide us to reweave the web of divine intelligence that defines us. They are a philosophy, a perspective, a practice, a performance art, and a prayer. Indeed, they are a cosmology, a modern medicine wheel rooted in trance, a series of interconnected maps to the moving center – the stillpoint in a dancing world. The 5Rhythms move us far beyond freestyle dancing. They are specific catalysts, keys that unlock the psyche and put it in motion to heal itself. Trance, like meditation, doesn't happen in an atmosphere of self-importance.

Trance is a mindful state that only happens when we get out of our own way and fall into a true self so deeply that we are both being and witnessing ourselves simultaneously. It takes a lot of preparation to let go of being the mover and allow oneself to be

moved. Trance is a tribal vibe; it seldom happens alone. And thus, we need each other.

My mentors, my teachers, are all on the dance floor. It is my place of learning. My Zen masters came right out of the subcultures I served. They were from lost or forgotten tribes, like disabled kids or migrant workers or abandoned seniors or encaged schizophrenics. We met in the back wards of institutions with pea green walls and stereo systems that didn't work. Mine was an ordinary world, and I have always felt that my work reflects its roots. I began teaching at sixteen. I didn't know anything except how to dance and even that wasn't useful, as I was teaching those who could barely move, much less execute a perfect pirouette. They taught me how to love, how to be present and how to simply be a witness.

For mentors, wise and faithful counselors, I turn first to my son Jonathan, who long ago surrendered to the 5Rhythms as a practice. To watch your kid fall in love with your work, take it on, turn it inside out and offer it, not only back to you, but to his own generation and beyond is a real blessing. And I can always count on him to guide me gently back on track when I get lost, tired, overwhelmed or just plain stuck.

And, then there are my friends and colleagues, many of whom began dancing with me over thirty-five years ago. They too have resurrected

and reinvented themselves by using these maps, and their wisdom is invaluable to me. We have a tendency to seek exotic answers and teachers while those we love, those who are making the journey with us, have exactly what we need. Together we can take refuge in rhythm. There is no dogma in the dance. Together we learn to dance on the skin of the great mother with our ears deeply tuned to her every whim.

Teaching is my spiritual practice. I am the student of these rhythms, and of all the amazing people who seek their wisdom. We recognize each other; we recognize our need for freedom and expression. The question I ask myself and everyone else is, “Do you have the discipline to be a free spirit?” Can we be free of all that binds and bends us into a shape of consciousness that has nothing to do with who we are from moment to moment, from breath to breath. We are now living in a time dominated by the rhythm of chaos and to learn to move with it is our survival art. The world moved to a staccato beat for 2,000 years and we were able to hide behind all kinds of structures. Now we need to shed skins, tears, masks, molds, and experience the breakdown the shattering of borders between body, heart and mind, between genders and generations, between nations and nomads. We are the transitional generation. Our grandchildren will be born and live in this rhythm of chaos and they won't have to deal with the same resistance to it. It is our responsibility to know it, to become comfortable with it, to embrace it and all its teachings and to pass this on to future generations.

On the dance floor I have learned how to surrender to chaos, to move with it. Around the world, rigidity is the unconscious response to this dynamic rhythm, as though it can be controlled. The rise of many fundamentalist movements mirrors this panic. To deal with chaos rigidly is like trying to swim in a straitjacket. In the 5Rhythm cosmology, chaos is linked to puberty. Well, the world is in puberty, folks, and we will survive it just like we survived our own puberty by dancing like maniacs with the music turned up loud enough to drown out our thoughts. Chaos is ushering us into a whole new level of creative thinking that comes from deep within our intuitive, instinctive resources.

When we are centered it doesn't matter what is going on in the world the inner or the outer world we can learn to maintain our equilibrium. When an athlete is in the "zone", the whole game slows down in her or his awareness, regardless of how fast it is moving. Slow dancing with chaos, finding our zone in this modern maelstrom, is not only spiritual practice – it is survival art. May we move together in the heartbeat of our wild and crazy world!