

Living Ritual Dance for Women: Journey out of Ancient Times

By Laura Shannon, Dip. D.M.T. (U.K.)

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This experiential workshop is based on simple folk dances, the living descendants of the primitive healing dance, which is also the ancestor of dance/movement therapy. Along with creative improvisation and meditation on ancient images of woman, they provide a structure for a 'living ritual'. This helps us journey to the roots of healing dance and to the source of our empowerment as women. We are enabled to find a new context for our present-day questioning, and new hope for the future we imagine.

Living Ritual Dance is a technique developed by Laura Shannon, out of many years of working with folk dance and creative ritual. It is also informed by the European Sacred/Circle Dance network, which for ten years has been a model for the experience of a more focused group consciousness in folk dance, and by dance/movement therapy theory and methods.

The simplest village folk dances are the ones which have survived the longest, and are considered by dance anthropologists to be the living descendants of the primitive therapeutic dance tradition which is also the ancestor of dance/movement therapy. Through them we can touch the source of dance as healing, communal expression, and receive new inspiration for our inner journey as well as our work in the modern world.

Dance therapy is said to have its roots in primitive healing dance as it has been practiced throughout history. Many authors in dance therapy literature including Leventhal, Levy, Bartenieff, Bernstein, Schmais, Hanna, Espenak and Blacking, acknowledge the historic use of dance as a therapeutic modality and an antecedent of present-day dance therapy. The early dance forms themselves have, for the most part, disappeared, but their influence is apparent in the ethnic and folk dance traditions descended from them: Lange tells us that "there is a visible connection between the art of the vanished 'primitive' cultures and those still existing" and that "these connections have lasted into contemporary times".

Modern dance pioneers Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Mary Wigman, Martha Graham and Rudolf Laban, with their renewed interest in ancient dance forms, established a more contemporary link between folk dance and dance therapy. They were able to witness, participate in and learn from folk and ethnic dance as it existed in their lifetimes. Rather than seek to imitate what they witnessed, these dancers were inspired to create works with new meaning, while

retaining an awareness of dance as inherently expressive and healing. In doing so, they prepared the ground for the development of dance therapy as a profession, which has always valued this awareness. Levy suggests that newer generations of dance therapists may need to develop this awareness further in their own experience of dance. Living Ritual Dance is one method of increasing our understanding of the essence of dance as communal, healing activity.

Living Ritual Dance mainly uses village dances from a range of Eastern European, Near Eastern and Asian nations, as well as Native American, African and newly choreographed dances. Living Ritual Dance does not aim to instruct in folk dance technique, nor to imitate 'traditional' cultures: its primary intention is to facilitate an experiential rediscovery of the ancient healing dance in which dance therapy has its roots, through the creative exploration of extant folk dances. We seek to relate these ancient dance forms to our modern selves, and to keep them alive in a way that has meaning for us today, by experiencing them in a ritual context.

The dances themselves are in line, open and closed circle, labyrinth/ spiral and solo formations, all of which contribute in their own way to the provision of a safe and supportive space in which healing can occur. Sharing rhythm and effort quality creates an atmosphere of mutual holding and support, while simple movements are repeated to evoke the universality of human experience in space and time. The circular dance pattern can be seen as a mandala, where the personal circle is aligned with the circle of the universe, and so the universal symbol of unity and totality becomes a personal symbol as well. The mandala enables each dancer to centre herself and harmonizes the different energies of the individual dancers into a balanced whole.

Participants in this women-only workshop will learn several simple dances. The group of women serves to emphasize the source of strength which is available in traditional women's dance movements, often centered in powerful yet gentle movement from the pelvis. Creative improvisation and movement meditation, within the structure provided by the dances themselves, create a 'living ritual' whereby we can experience the timeless energy of communal dance in a new way.

The ritual is created primarily by the forms and structures of the dances themselves, and is given meaning by the attitude and intention that the dancers bring to it. As Beck and Metrick explain in *The Art of Ritual*, the purpose of creative ritual is to increase "balance and connection within ourselves, with each other, the world, and with the larger rhythms and energies that bring stability and light to our lives". The ritual can serve as a symbolic bridge between the roots of our profession, its present-day questioning, and the future we imagine.

An integral part of the living ritual is the movement meditation inspired by images of ancient sacred statues and figurines from all over the world. Sometimes

reflecting gestures that appear in the dances, these strong female images provide a concrete and undeniable historical precedent for the body-oriented empowerment of women. Noble, speaking of these statues, affirms that "The power of images is undebatable. The presence in our time of these ancient images ... is of great benefit to women attuning to our innate power."

These images are increasingly available to us and lend themselves beautifully to movement work. Gadon believes that "The Goddess once again is becoming a symbol of empowerment for women; a catalyst for an emerging spirituality that is earth-centered; a metaphor for the earth as a living organism; an archetype for feminine consciousness; a mentor for healers; the emblem of a new political movement; an inspiration for artists; and a model for resacralizing woman's body and the mystery of human sexuality."

The ancient dance forms, like the ancient female forms, renewed by our creative attention and participation, nourish our understanding of the body as sacred. This occurs on three levels: our individual bodies, the collective body of the dancing group moving as one, and the body of the earth upon whom we dance. Healing and transformation can occur not through attempting to re-create the past, but, as Gadon describes, through "creating new sacred images that embody the old symbols." Ultimately we seek the integration of ancient and modern forms of dance and ritual, in a movement event which holds significance for us, personally and professionally.

Re-experiencing the roots of Dance/Movement Therapy can strengthen theoretical and practical understanding of the history of our profession, and provide support and nurturing among women on the inner journey. This journey retraces our steps back to ancient times: we realize the power and significance of what we experience there, and adapt it as we dance out again into the present and towards the future. This experiential presentation will include time for discussion as well.