



This **JOY**
Heals

**Tapping into the
encoded wisdom and
transformative power
within women's
ritual dances.**

Celebrating 10 years

**WISDOM
DANCES**



*It is music and dancing
that makes me at peace
with the world and
with myself.*

-Nelson Mandela

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INTRODUCTION

This story is about the pursuit of aliveness.

Dancing is when I feel most alive. Beyond my beating heart, dance is where I also meet an aliveness that is bigger than me.

In particular this is a story about learning how to tap into the aliveness within women's ritual dances from the Balkans, Greece, and Asia Minor. I offer my personal story of creating a place for these dances and their wisdom to unfold in my life. This is a story about how the healing they offer is multidimensional and powerful. The gifts within women's ritual dances help us

- *Build resilience and weather the storms of life*
- *Connect with European indigenous roots*
- *Radiate harmony and joy into the world*
- *Tap into an ancient Wisdom tradition*

This is the story of these themes unfurling through ten years of work in Wisdom Dances, creating a dance community unlike any other in North America. Each chapter explores how these themes have become more and more alive.

Dear reader, I invite you to enter into this story with your longings. The storms are all around us now. Are you hungry to make a connection to life-giving wisdom within European indigenous roots? Do you thirst for a connection to wisdom that can guide you through this threshold time for our planet? Are you wondering how you can have an impact on the world, maybe even with a touch of joy?



This story is for you.

*Love,
Emily Jarrett Hughes
Creatrix of Wisdom Dances*

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SEARCHING FOR INDIGENOUS EUROPEAN ROOTS

I always want to get to the root of things. Without getting to the root every effort feels as futile as trimming back the same trees along the foundation of my house. When pruned back those pesky trees keep growing even longer and abundant branches. I only succeed in removing them when I get out my shovel, dig deep, and pull out their roots.

The transformation I seek goes all the way to the root level. If my daughter keeps struggling in the same places I don't want to become a broken record correcting her; I want to figure out the underlying problem. My quest to get at the root of my health challenges led me to qigong. I'm always interested in discovering the misunderstanding or disconnect at the root of every conflict.

In high school I was on fire to root out everything that stops feminine power from creating in partnership with masculine power. I started with policy, drafting the sexual harassment policy for my school district. But I quickly became frustrated with the limits of policy – we can't legislate people's behaviors and attitudes. What would get to the root of creating a culture of respect among people and with nature?



Dancing on Greek Easter with Laura Shannon (second from left, in blue and white) 2016, Lesvos, Greece. Photo courtesy Emily Jarrett Hughes

It took me a long time to realize that my desire to get at the root of things is also a quest to get to my own roots. Roots are what connect us to nutrients and support, to Mother Earth, and to our place in the Universe.

I fell in love with women's traditional ritual dances from the Balkans, Greece, and Asia Minor because I could sense they had deep roots, roots long and strong enough to bring life and sustenance to some of the deepest and most wounded parts of my soul.



*Standing strong with deep roots at Roots and Kinship gathering in 2019,
photo by Heidi Inman.*

Tending roots and lineage has been a core theme throughout my teaching these past ten years. The pursuit of matrifocal, Indigenous European roots led to the creation of Wisdom Dances. Cultivating deep roots is ongoing, multi-dimensional work. I often write about different facets of this topic but in this book, in much longer form, I weave it all together.

Searching for European Indigenous Roots

Most of my ancestors have been in North America since the late 1600s, long enough to have lost a sense of coming from somewhere specific in Europe (mainly Great Britain). I have no sense of homeland, nor was I taught by my family and culture how to be a relative to the land. I grew up worrying about the many droughts we experienced in California and have been anticipating climate change since childhood.

I have been haunted by an existential sense of loss – lost connection to the land and lost connection to a regenerative culture.

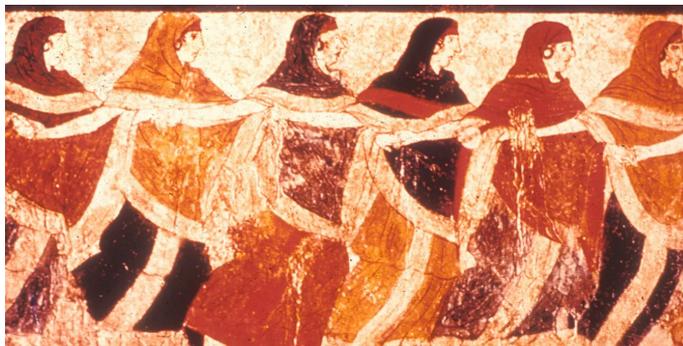
I've wondered: Do we have the human capacity to live better? Indigenous voices, particularly from Turtle Island/North America, make so much sense to me. I've longed to connect with the European Indigenous voices. What happened to them? Could I ever get over the grief of losing connection to them?

Sometimes I rage at Western civilization. But my people are from the West, and just like family, it is complex. My direct ancestors participated in the best and worst of our history, from the underground railroad to promoting education to “civilize” Indians. Some of the women in my family were artists and scientists and others (at least two) were persecuted as witches.



Some of my ancestors.

I know that my ancestors want me to understand they were trying their best. They made the most of what they had for themselves and for their family. There was honor and decency in all of them. My family is Western civilization and I am formed by their love and dreams.



A funeral dance. Greek fresco from a tomb. 5th c. BC. Apulia, Magna Grecia.

I believe humanity has always had the impulse to love and live in harmony with each other. Sometimes this impulse has even been allowed to bloom in beautiful egalitarian cultures. There might not have been a perfect golden age. But I am inspired by the research by Marija Gimbutas which points to a time in the Neolithic archeological record when everyone got enough to eat and people were buried with the tools for craft rather than weapons.

I am confident there is a golden impulse. Sometimes it flourishes. Sometimes it is hidden. As I've studied the mystical tradition within Christianity I notice a similar pattern. The lives of the mystics shine from direct encounter with the Sacred, sometimes creating mini-renaissances of prayer, art, and healing (Saint Hildegard, for example). The flaring forth of mysticism has also always been disruptive to and targeted by rigid, power hoarding, religious institutions. No matter how tightly any tradition might try to control doctrine – Wisdom can't help but periodically assert itself.

Similarly, no matter how segregated and stratified we have become as a civilization, the impulse to know our mutuality and care for one another is also there and wanting to break through. How could I help this impulse towards sustainability and community thrive in my life and the world?



Dancing women of Chania, Crete, early 20th C.



Laura Shannon

Enter Women’s Traditional Ritual Dances

Unexpectedly, in my late 20s I found myself falling in love with a form of dance that opened me up to a world of wholeness. I began deep study with Laura Shannon and her pioneering approach to women’s ritual dances from the Balkans, Greece, and Asia Minor. These simple circle dances taught me how to manage my energy and to connect with earth. It was balm for my soul!

I’d found the holy grail. The dances contain everything. They were the container, the glue that has held communities together for thousands of years. Laura’s research brings forward how the dances encode an ancient world view that embodies sustainability, community, and reverence for the earth.

Laura has written extensively about how the dances represent a living inheritance of indigenous European wisdom with direct roots in early egalitarian matriarchal cultures of Neolithic Europe, for instance in her articles ‘Women’s Ritual Dances and the Nine Touchstones of Goddess Spirituality’ and ‘Generosity and Community: the Alternative Worldview of Women’s Ritual Dance’.

The methodology Laura developed through her original research is based on her observation that dance, music, embroidery, and folk tales all speak in symbols which are interconnected.

Studying with Laura was like being given a decoder ring for an encoded symbolic language. Understanding the symbols opens the door to connecting with what she calls a dance-based women’s mystery school.



Apron from Crete with embroidery of winged goddess with two birds, from the collection of Ethnic Dance Theatre. Photo by Emily Jarrett Hughes.

I stand taller with this connection to Indigenous European wisdom. The European wisdom for creating regenerative culture is not all lost! There is evidence that the symbolic language encoded in the dances, songs, and textiles was once widespread throughout Europe (see, for instance, the work of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas and textile researchers Mary Kelly, two of Laura’s key teachers).

As Laura explains, this ‘language’ survived better in Eastern Europe partly because the Eastern Orthodox Church did not ban dancing and had no organized witch burnings (although women were oppressed in other ways). I’m grateful my Eastern European cousins help me connect to our very deep shared roots.

With hindsight I can see that I have always been attracted to the fragments of this old world view. They are all around. In my first dance class I danced among Grecian columns at the Temple of the Wings with flowers in my hair.

My early love of Swan Lake sparked my imagination with the shape shifting winged woman. When I was at Bryn Mawr College, we left offerings for the statue of Athena, the patron goddess of the college, and sang in Greek to praise Sophia. Two of my ancestors also attended that school, and I can imagine them following these traditions as well. In a strange way, these small connections to old European wisdom have been passed down to me all along. Often the symbol is there with no meaning. But with the decoder ring I can now tap into this great lineage of wisdom that still moves among us.



Emily Jarrett Hughes as a child dancing at the Temple of the Wings.

My dance training with Laura Shannon taught me life skills beyond the dance steps and one of the most powerful is the discipline of honoring lineages.

I began to notice many areas in my life where I needed to develop my sense of rootedness. This grounding work has been deeply entwined with Wisdom Dances.

Honoring the stories in the land

I am blessed to live in a place that the Dakota people hold sacred. In the last ten years I have devoted a lot of attention to learning the stories of this land: the Dakota place names, the history of the Dakota way of life, and how it changed as European settlement poured into the area, including the darkest hour of the Dakota internment camp just miles from my home. I've also delved into the natural history of this landscape so that I can help people feel the connection between the land and the story of the planet, of the entire universe.



Photos from the Mystical Musical Summer, 2016. Over several weeks we met to sing and learn the Dakota sacred stories of the landscape from Owamni (St. Anthony Falls) to Wita Tanka (Pike Island).

Even before the pandemic made teaching outside normal I taught in Lake Hiawatha Park and along the Mississippi River. My intent is to make this landscape become intimately alive for people through repeated visits to specific places over many seasons and years.

Connecting with the Ancestors

Every November we dance in honor of our ancestors. This tradition has inspired me and many of my long-time students to dive deeper into our family stories.



Ancestor altar created at the All Soul's Day retreat 2019. Photos by Emily Jarrett Hughes

Family research has been a constant personal undercurrent this past decade and it continues to sharpen my sense of the gifts and responsibilities I inherited from my family. I have a chance to transform some of their painful or unjust legacies.

Rooting Out White Supremacy Culture

Dancing helps me root out my unwanted lineage of white supremacy culture. Dance emphasizes the power of learning through the body, community over individuality.

the importance of right timing and the harmonization of opposites. These qualities are direct antidotes to the poison of individualism, urgency, either/or thinking, and “if it’s not written it doesn’t exist,” some of the key characteristics of white supremacy culture as described by Tema Okun. People are talking a lot more than they did ten years ago about how the body intersects with anti-racism work. There is more I can do to help articulate the connection between dancing with liberation.



Dance as part of the planning for the Women's Congress for Future Generations, 2017.

Returning to my Christian Lineage

I have been surprised to discover that one of the most dynamic places for me to teach is with feminist, Christian contemplative groups who are hungry to tap into the wisdom of the body. I’ve received invitations to be part of many wonderful conferences and as a result have had my own homecoming in my direct ancestral spiritual tradition. I had drifted away from the Church for quite a while because the Wisdom path within Christianity has been greatly obscured. But it is there!

Even though it is nurtured on the edge of the institutional church, Wisdom is at the core of the tradition. I now see myself as part of the movement to recover the Wisdom tradition as it flows through Christianity so it can be a blessing for the future.



Wisdom Dances and Lyla June Johnson performing together at Roots and Kinship Gathering, 2019. Photos by Heidi Inman

Roots and Kinship

What if every person felt connected to the streams of Indigenous wisdom within their ancestral lineages? Could these roots be the key to awakening a new sense of kinship among all people, among all of life? What would this look like? Wisdom Dances created a prototype of this vision in 2019.

I had been electrified by an article titled “Reclaiming our Indigenous European Roots” by Lyla June Johnston. Lyla has a very interesting perspective as someone with both Diné and European roots. I reached out to her and invited her to collaborate. We created a gathering titled Roots and Kinship featuring music and dance.

For the final song, my group of dancers created a instrumental version of her techno song “Time Traveler.”

Together we sang:

*...A product of ancestral love,
I’m here because my elders
Danced in the sun.
They would give it all up for us
And from day one it was
Practiced like religion
To prepare for the ones to come.*

Chorus

*We are here
To give all of our love
To the ones unborn*

*...It’s not about you.
It’s about the song that is
Traveling through.
It travels through time.
Singers will die
But the song lives on
Through matrilineal lines...*



photo of Lyla June Johnston

These lyrics resonate so deeply in me. Because of both my personal ancestry work and experience dancing women’s traditional dances, I feel how I am the ‘product of ancestral love.’ I am an ephemeral carrier of songs and dances that are meant to live on beyond me.

Passing it Forward

The word tradition means something that is passed on, often through custom or example without being written down. Carrying forward a tradition is a profound responsibility. It bears a much larger sense of time and connection to humanity than the more personal joy of seeing my daughter and her cousins grow up. It taps into a sense of what my highest human purpose is as part of this evolving universe.

Every day I think about how I carry a tradition from a culture different than my own, thousands of miles from its place of origin. Caring for a tradition requires both guarding its integrity and also allowing it to live and grow. Some degree of creative evolution is inevitable in my context and the challenge is to allow that to happen consciously and in a way that preserves the wisdom thread within it.



Dancing on Easter and sitting with the Molyvos dance troupe on the island of Lesvos, Greece in 2016. Photos provided by Emily Jarrett Hughes.

I've certainly felt like an imposter. I hope I never stop asking myself questions about cultural appropriation. Yet as I've strengthened my sense of connection with the dance lineage, I've grown in confidence.

Traveling to study with Laura Shannon on the island of Lesbos, Greece, in 2016 helped me connect more deeply with the wisdom teachings within the dance and made my teaching more comprehensive.

I am grateful to all the village grandmothers in Greece and the Balkans who have been willing to share their dance, song, and ritual traditions with Laura. Laura tells a moving story about the women in one particular village, where she made many visits over many years to learn their dances. At first they asked her to keep certain songs and customs strictly secret. But in recent years, seeing their wisdom traditions in danger of disappearing, they started asking her to share everything, to keep the essence of their ritual dances alive.



Mid-Summer Dance Celebration, 2019. Photo by Heidi Niska.

The grandmothers want the songs and dances to live. The deeper I get into Wisdom Dances, the more I wonder if my work really isn't about me, my dreams, or my hunt for roots.

Maybe Wisdom Dances is simply a response to an impulse initiated by the dances themselves. They want to move forward and I am a willing vessel.

I feel awe at the habitat that I've been able to provide these dance traditions. We have live music thanks to the serendipity that connected us to the talented and kindred bouzoukist/guitarist/vocalist Greg Herriges. Even my childhood sewing has found purpose as I've made many costumes.

I am so grateful. It is an honor and a privilege to dance every week. Carrying these dances forward is one of the most meaningful endeavors of my life.

2

LESSONS LEARNED FROM WEATHERING A STORM

How do we weather the storms in life?

This question matters to me not only because I've needed to get through my personal dangerous and disorienting storms and also not only because I worry about basement flooding or losing electricity in a blizzard. This question is also about the big storm coming: climate change, and all the social and political chaos accentuated by it.

Weathering a Storm is the name of one of Wisdom Dances' first projects. This project grew through many forms as the theme of community resilience and honoring water evolved. It is the story of going beyond creating the appearance of community well-being, instead learning to create it from the inside out.

In 2013 the construction of the light rail Green Line was nearing completion and I seized an opportunity to be one of many arts groups engaged in creative place making in this very disrupted area. I received a tiny little grant from Irrigate which was administered by Springboard for the Arts. My concept was huge.

The construction of the light rail included massive new storm water infrastructure. The project included rain gardens, stormwater planters, infiltration trenches, tree trenches and permeable surfaces all with the purpose of helping stormwater runoff soak into the ground rather than run into the storm sewer.



A young helper for Wisdom Dances enthusiastically pouring water to demonstrate permeable pavers. Photo by Jennifer Larson.

This also reduces the phosphorous and sediment in runoff while improving air quality, protecting pollinator habitats, and reducing the urban heat island effect. You can see I get excited about green infrastructure. It's important because we are experiencing more and more severe and extreme weather.

Weathering a Storm began as an invitation to notice and appreciate this important infrastructure. It was also an invitation to think about an even larger question: what cultural and community infrastructure do we have to weather the storms of life?

On a September Sunday afternoon during an Open Streets event on University Avenue I created a three part dance event. I organized a small group of dancers and also invited Voice of Culture Dance & Drum and Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc to perform.



Kenna Cottman and Voice of Culture, Emily Jarrett Hughes in Wisdom Dances, and Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc, St. Paul Open Streets 2014. Photos by Jennifer Larson

The energy and color of our dancing was an invitation to think about these questions:

How does water move down the street, through your community, and in your life?

How well will your community withstand severe storms?

How does dance and culture help communities survive literal and figurative storms?

The best part of the experience was appreciating the talent and deep commitment from my collaborating arts groups. A few friends came. A handful of people passed by on their bikes and maybe a couple stopped.



*Wisdom Dances performing at the St. Paul Open Streets Water Festival, 2014,
photos by Jennifer Larson*

Full of passion and buoyed by the enthusiasm from the Capitol Region Watershed District, I was inspired to go even bigger the next year. I created a whole afternoon of performances with six different cultural groups during the next year's Open Streets festival.

Culture is an expression of how we understand our relationships to each other and all of life. Infrastructure is a reflection of a culture's relationship to the land. I wondered what would happen if I could get together with other cultural dance groups and really talk about how we are building cultural infrastructure and how that intersects with green infrastructure. I convened the Culture of Water Leadership Summit with this question.

While I completed the projects that year, attendance was really low. I wasn't having the depth of conversation and connection that I wanted. I realized I was ten years ahead of myself. Relationship building takes time. I was full of big concepts in my dancing, but they were not really manifest enough in a way that other people could relate to them.

Here is what grew out of the Weathering a Storm Project.

I met one of my teachers

One of the people I met over the course of the Weathering a Storm project suggested that I join the St. Louis River Nibi

(Water) Walk happening later that autumn. It was a chilly, drizzly day when I joined a group of strangers in this walking ceremony for the water based in Ojibwe teachings. I said an awkward first hello to Sharon M Day, the leader of the walk. The day concluded with a ceremony on Spirit Island in the river delta before Lake Superior, and I knew I had found a connection I had been looking for.

I keep showing up to support the group with what is needed, in particular communications support. I continue to learn about how to honor the water, how to be in community and how to participate in the work of decolonizing. This ongoing relationship building persists in the background, influencing how I develop my own work.



Photo by Jane Ramseyer Miller

I got a much bigger perspective on the storms of life

The big story of cosmic evolution puts even the most catastrophic storms in perspective. The reason dance and qigong had already been so powerful for me is because they connected to experiences of being in deep harmony with the universe. I already generally knew the science of the universe story. I was introduced to the idea of how our consciousness is also part of this evolution, first by Ilia Delio and then by many others, and this has brought depth and context to all my practices.



Left: Winter solstice spiral 2021, photo by Colleen Puent, Right: Whirlpool Galaxy by the Hubble Space Telescope.

I hadn't realized how much I'd been looking at the horizon of climate chaos as the end times. The Universe story helped me understand a much great continuity, and a powerful, trustworthy impulse towards more beauty, complexity, and cooperation. The chaos of storms began to feel less senseless, and instead part of larger patterns. I developed some workshops teaching the cosmic story through movement and contemplation; we all need this foundational understanding of who we are and where we are going.

Slowly and steadily I danced into my vision



Left: The Wisdom Dances Band: Jill Galstad, Emily Jarrett Hughes, and Greg Herriges (2017), photo by Sue Cochrane. Right: Wisdom Dances at Get Outdoors Day (2019), photo by Isaiah Bischoff

We dance every week. Gradually we have developed a cycle of traditions we observe through the year including the winter solstice, many springtime celebrations, mid-summer, and All Soul's Day. We now make our own music, thanks to sweet partnership with musician Greg Herriges. We have two sets of traditional dress that we wear on special occasions.

Over time we have become more and more deeply engaged with the mythology and symbols encoded in our dance songs. I tell my new students that it takes at least a year to experience the full cycle of the dance, and at least a few years through that cycle before one can fully own the wisdom of that cycle in their bodies. This is transformational community building and it is deeply satisfying.

The storms are here and we are weathering them together

Our dance circle has had the honor of dancing with two of our members through the final stages of their life. We have seen each other through big losses, health challenges, and big life changes. The dancing is incredibly reliable container. Sometimes people are dragging themselves to class and feel on the edge of falling apart but invariably the dance reconnects them to a sense of being held by a much bigger.

Then the pandemic arrived. It continues to reveal and heighten all the storms that are already here. We found new forms to dance together every week – online and then outside. Our city erupted with the movement for Black Liberation. Everything was disrupted. We kept dancing. The uncertainties continue. We keep dancing. Several people have told me the relatively consistent presence of our dance circle made all the difference in their being able to weather the recent storms. This is what weathering a storm is all about.



Photo by Jennifer Larson, Spring Equinox 2015



Dancing IN the water, 2018. Photo by Greg Herriges

Honor the Water

My attention has expanded from thinking about storms (or droughts) to honoring water. I have paid special attention to songs and rituals connected to women's ritual dances that help us restore our relationship with water. Inspired by the Great Blessing of the Waters celebrated by the Orthodox Church, Wisdom Dances holds an annual water blessing in mid-January. We dance alongside the water and with the water throughout the year.

3

FROM FRIVOLOUS TO NECESSITY: LEARNING TO TRUST THAT DANCE MATTERS

At age eighteen I attended the 1995 NGO Forum on Women in Beijing, China. I combed through the catalog of thirty concurrent sessions looking for the one that would offer me the best solution for world peace.

I had built up in my head that the conference was going to be a life-changing experience, and made myself crazy looking for that life changing moment. I can look back and see that moment came when an older woman swished into the hallway to wait with me for the next conference session. I was feeling serious and overwhelmed. She'd just been at a mask making workshop and her aliveness was electric.

I noticed all sorts of judgment within myself. Voices that said things like “the arts are just for fun, but not really effective” or “we need to be serious and responsible.”

But another voice within me said if I was going to survive this epic conference, I was going to need to let in the breath of creativity and joy. Why was I postponing that aliveness for another time? The Beijing conference became my introduction to ways women around the world are using street theater, circus arts, fashion, dance and music, for transformation.



The Women's Circus from Australia, Indian street theater performers, and eco-living activists from the Netherlands, Beijing NGO Forum on Women, 1995. Photos by Emily Jarrett Hughes

The arts are inherently about transformation. Stories, music, dance, and all manner of beauty are remaking us and remaking the world all the time. It is limiting to consider the arts as an accessory tool for change, creating pretty signs and songs for the movement. Participating in the arts is inherently about expanding how we understand our place in the world and our relationships to others. Our quality of attention affects how we access this spiritual creative alchemy.

I'd even go so far as to say the arts are the original medium of social transformation. Humanity's shift into agriculture may not have been possible without dancing and singing.

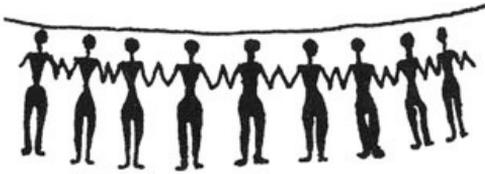
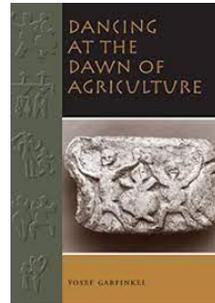


Figure 1: Rows of dancing figures on shards of Neolithic pottery from Khazineh, Iran and Tell Halaf, Iraq, 6th millennium BCE. Copyright Yosef Garfinkel 2003.



Yosef Garfinkel's research (see *Dancing at the Dawn of Agriculture*) shows how scenes of dancing appear in Near Eastern prehistoric art, reaching as far back as the 9th millennium BCE. Garfinkel states that before the emergence of literacy, “community rituals, symbolized by dance, were the basic mechanisms for conveying education and knowledge to the adult members of the community and from one generation to the next.”

In the first chapter I wrote about my joy in finding women's ritual dance traditions that connect me with ancient Indigenous European roots. It is an extraordinary feat for thousands of years of civilization to preserve a symbolic language that encodes the values of community and sustainability. Why and how did they do it? It must have been important. And if it's important, what does that mean for us?

Dancing Matters

The predominant images in artwork from early matrifocal egalitarian cultures in Europe and the Near East included the tree of life, spiral, butterfly, zig-zag and of course the Great Mother.

As scholar Laura Shannon writes in *Generosity and Community: the Alternative World View of Women's Ritual Dance, Part 1*, these symbols have been passed down because they have meaning. They were preserved in seemingly innocuous forms (textiles, songs, dances, and fairy tales). Dismissed as “women's work,” they were smuggled safely through centuries of patriarchy.

My initial dismissal of the arts at the Beijing conference because they were “frivolous” or “ineffective” reflects how I was also raised to dismiss the wisdom and power carried within women's ritual dances.

I never cease to be impressed by how often villages danced together. In many circumstances the whole village would dance together once a week for several hours. In addition there would be many special feast days throughout the year. Weddings would often involve days of dancing. I know people who strive to homestead their land; it is long, hard work. Survival is at stake. Through my training with Laura I came to understand all this dancing was not a frivolous distraction but rather the glue that holds it all together. Dancing is so essential to survival that it is even sometimes seen as obligation within village communities.

The idea of dance as an obligation was truly mind-bending for me. Having just overcome my reservations about dance being frivolous, now it was my responsibility?! Say what?

Dancing mattered more and more to me as the years passed; it brought me home to myself, to my place and history, and to the planet. What if the dancing also mattered beyond me personally?



*Dancing through arches, Dodge Nature Center, 2013,
photo by Jennifer Larson.*

In 2014, I started participating in Indigenous water ceremonies led by Ojibwe elder Sharon Day. We walked along a river, praying. I was struck by the group's complete confidence that it mattered. What if I could have the same confidence in my dancing?

Bee Love

I became particularly interested in the variety of springtime dance traditions in the Balkans. For example, in many St. Lazarus Day celebrations, groups of girls dance and sing from house to house in the village. They sang songs particular to someone who raises sheep, grows grapevines, or keeps bees. I couldn't stop wondering, what if this isn't just a quaint custom like trick or treating on Halloween is today? What if it mattered?



Left: Bee Love at the Powderhorn Park Interdependence Day Celebration 2015, Photo by Kathryn Sharpe. Right: Bee Love at the Minneapolis Pollinator Party 2016. Photo by Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew.

Inspired by St. Lazarus Day traditions, I started experimenting with dancing to bless our community. In 2015, Bee Love first appeared as a public art installation on the Mid-Town Greenway in Minneapolis. I created an enormous bee hive out of egg cartons and gold spray paint and we danced around it in honor of the bees. I sewed costumes inspired by the traditional dress from the Shope region of Bulgaria. We learned some bee songs.



Left: Bee Love at PolliNation, 2017, photo by Heidi Niska. Right: Bee Love at the Minneapolis Pollinator Party 2018, photo by Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew.

For the next few summers Bee Love popped up at many pollinator-themed events in the region. We cultivated connection and celebration among people and with the bees. We were there to love the bees. We were there to celebrate our power, and yes, even responsibility, to be love radiators to the world around us.

Dancing in a festival format gave us the opportunity to present the idea of a tradition. But interactions with passersby were not very satisfying. It was hard to know how much of the big idea came across.

In 2019, we decided that we wanted to live out the tradition ourselves. We gathered before the sunrise in a park and rolled in the morning dew. Then we put on our ritual dress and roved and around the city to dance for friends and special places. That year, four members in our community faced serious health challenges; we made house calls and hospital visits with our dances. We could literally see the joy and energy of our dances bring life to our friends eyes. It mattered.

Two years later, our community was raw from the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd. It was time to experiment with dancing not just for our friends but also for our community and the earth. We danced with intention around Powderhorn Park and we traveled to the farm for Indigi-Baby Food and danced around each of the fields.



*Left: The Bees visit to help a friend with healing, 2019. Photo by Hanna Esparza.
Right: Bees dancing around the fields for Indigi-baby food, 2021. Photo by Mary Martin.*



The Bees beginning the Earth Day celebration on the banks of the Mississippi River north of downtown Minneapolis, 2022, photo by Sandy Spieler. Returning the water carried throughout the day at Crosby Farm Park, St. Paul, photo by Colleen Puent.

In 2022, we danced through the Twin Cities following the route of the Mississippi River. When we arrived at a community garden with a bee hive, neighbors looked us over and said “So you are here for the bees?” We had fun being recognized (at least in part) without explanation.

We are the bees

Bees became more and more significant to us over time. I first chose the bee theme because I wanted to fit into Greenway event and there were no suitable lake or river access points. I would have continued with the Weathering a Storm theme from the previous chapter. Still wanting to celebrate green infrastructure I honed in on the pollinator gardens.

The word for honeybees in ancient Greece was *Melissae*. That term could also refer to oracular Bee Nymphs.

Just as the bees are integral to the harvest, the priestesses who were dedicated to the agricultural rites and the mysteries of life and death were also called Melissae.

I've come to see myself as a bee, pollinating wisdom between dance, qigong, Christian mysticism, and much more. The core community of our dancers now informally refer to themselves as "the bees." Our dances are a way to pollinate and bring life to our community.

Honeybees act as a hive rather than as individuals. They are role models for me of what a new kind of community consciousness could be.



The Bees share ritual bread at a garden party in 2015, photo by Emily Jarrett Hughes

Gratitude to the Wisdom Dances ecosystem

As I reflect on ten years, I appreciate the ecosystem that has supported the hive of Wisdom Dances. Without the support of my family I would not have had the confidence and freedom to serve the dance in this way. Bee Love would not have been possible without a core group of incredibly loyal and dedicated dance students. Gifts from individual donors have also provided meaningful support to this work.

I appreciate all the organizations that have collaborated with or nurtured me: ARTSAGE, Capitol Region Watershed District, Christine Center, Dans Askina, Dodge Nature Center, Ethnic Dance Theatre, Hamline University, Indigenous Peoples Task Force, Lyla June Johnson, Lyngblomsten, Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, Midtown Greenway Coalition, Minneapolis Community Education, Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, MN Conference of the United Church of Christ, Nibi Walk, Northside FLOW, Plymouth Congregational Church, PolliNation, Powderhorn Park Neighborhood Association, Ramsey-Washington Metro Watershed District, Robbinsdale Parkway United Church of Christ, Saint Paul Smart Trips, Social Innovation Lab, Spring Forest Qigong, Springboard for the Arts, Storydance, Tapestry Folkdance Center, Wisdom Ways Center for Spirituality, and the Women's Congress for Future Generations. Special gratitude to Lake Hiawatha and the Mississippi River!

Pollination is what brings life to our communities

Women's ritual dances don't hold a monopoly on the power to bless. My study of qigong has made me particularly aware that every word, every action, even every thought matters. No love is ever wasted. Every prayer and good wish counts. There are so many forms that collective prayer can take. It matters that we join together in community and offer up our hopes to the sacred.

Women's ritual dances have a particular power for me because they touch so many dimensions and weave them together. My body hums with warmth and energy when dancing. I feel profoundly held when I join hands with others. The singing and music transport me and often create a light trance state. I feel connected to a great lineage of ancestors. I become the embodiment of sacred symbols. I feel so alive in the land where I am dancing. All of this is a powerful, multi-sensory preparation for opening my heart even more deeply to Mystery. Life pours into me, into our circle, and into our community.



The Bees welcome people to a lecture by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, Hamline University, 2018. Photo by Nancy Victorin-Vangerud

I have confidence on the transformative power of dance. It matters!

4

CELEBRATING SIX GREAT TEACHERS WHO HAVE INSPIRED WISDOM DANCES

Michael Bischoff

I live in Minnesota because I wanted to work with my friend Michael. Michael was my boss at Friends for a Non-Violent World, and with his super-power of appreciating others, he taught me about group facilitation, giving and receiving feedback, play, and listening to the spirit's movement through my work. Later Michael was among the first to seriously incubate the idea of Wisdom Dances and was my most reliable sounding board for strategic challenges and conflicts I encountered.



While Michael had a profound impact on the course of my professional life, I think of him foremost as a teacher for how I create family. We became family to each other, sharing a family dinner together every week for 17 years. He officiated our wedding but more than that, he is the friend who most guided me in choosing how I want to be family, rather than simply inheriting patterns or social expectations. His final gift to me was intimately sharing his adventure with brain cancer which moved him on from this world in 2020.

Laura Shannon

I first traveled to New Hampshire to study with Laura Shannon in 2005 because I had tasted something more – a vitality I could vaguely name – coming through traditional dances. I wanted more of that aliveness. Laura’s now 30 plus years of research in dance is totally unique because unlike most other dance ethnographers who would learn dances from the men in the village, Laura concentrates in learning from the village grandmothers. She created an approach to unlocking the wisdom within the dances by studying the step patterns, song lyrics, costumes, and related folktales and mythology. She has done the research which reveals that women’s ritual dances practiced today in the Balkans, Greece, and Asia Minor have a living, unbroken (although certainly evolved) connection to ancient European culture that values community, sustainability, and reverence for the Earth

Dancing with Laura has taught me how to consciously learn through the body. Through her unique approach to teaching, I have been able to sense for the first time with my whole being what reciprocity really feels like.



Before this experience I had only thought of sustainability in a mechanistic sort of way. Experiencing mutuality in my body while dancing changed my whole approach to living well with the Earth and community. Laura continues to teach me the gifts and responsibilities that come with being part of a lineage and carrying a tradition towards the future. She has been a powerful example about the of generosity and hospitality.

Master Chunyi Lin

I sought out Master Lin, founder of Spring Forest Qigong, when I experienced a health crisis in 2006. At first my heart would race when he walked into the room because I was so excited that this renowned healer might make a miracle happen. It was three years and a recurrence before I relaxed enough to fully receive his healing gifts and then my recovery, finally, was miraculous. That healing experience awakened in me a whole new understanding of myself in the universe and it changed everything.



I have only grown in appreciation for how beautifully simple and powerful the Spring Forest Qigong system is for not only healing, but also longevity, connecting with life purpose, and spiritual growth. Master Lin is always learning, experimenting, and evolving in his teaching and this is also a great inspiration. At first I thought his guidance for healing the world was too simple but I have learned how he has experienced true suffering (he is not naïve at all) and find his approach the best for my sanity. I would not have found my way in Spring Forest Qigong if Master Lin had not also been cultivating teachers to teach teachers to teach teachers. Spring Forest Qigong Masters Jim Nance, Katrina Tobey, Glenn Tobey, Gadu Doushin, and Jaci Gran have also played a huge role in my development.

Sharon M Day

I met Sharon Day in 2014 during the St. Louis River Nibi (Water) Walk that she was leading. Sharon is enrolled in the Bois Forte Band of Ojibwe and is a part of their Grand



Medicine Society called the M'dewin. She has been leading extended ceremonies for the water, called Nibi Walks, since 2011. She has walked over 10,000 river miles. I've joined her on 10 of those walks and have become deeply involved in communications and fundraising for all things Nibi Walk. I also served on the curatorial team for an art exhibit about Nibi Walks in 2021.

Sharon's leadership is based in commitment to fulfilling the Council of Seven Fires prophesy that human kind must evolve into a new people grounded in spirituality. This commitment is behind the generous way she teaches and leads the ceremonies. It is what drew me to her. The walks immerse me in learning how to be in a community based in sharing and mutual support, breaking down my inner silo of individualism. While I don't teach or lead water walking – that is not mine to do – my experience has profoundly shaped how I show up in every other practice I teach. I want to make my water family proud!

Ilia Delio

Ilia is a Franciscan Sister with doctorates in both science and religion. We met very briefly when she spoke in Saint Paul in 2015 and I facilitated an embodied counterpoint to her brilliant lectures.



Unlike the other teachers listed above, she might sort of remember me, but basically we don't know each other. Nonetheless, she has been a huge inspiration because she is able to use Christian language to talk about science, evolution, and the story of the cosmos. She opened the door that has stopped me from abandoning the Christian tradition I was raised in.

Christianity is part of my lineage and I'm committed to both restoring and transforming this spiritual lineage into a blessing for the future.

Ilia's definition of a Christian inspires me (from the Unbearable Wholeness of Being): "One who is connected through the heart to the whole of life, attuned to the deeper intelligence of nature, and called forth irresistibly by the Spirit to express creatively their gifts in the evolution of self and the world." Ilia's writing is super dense and I've found it helpful to branch out to more keepers of the wisdom within the Christian tradition, including Valentin Tomberg (admittedly even more dense), Cynthia Bourgeault (still pretty heady), and Richard Rohr.

Joanna Macy, PhD

Joanna is a scholar of Buddhism, systems thinking and deep ecology. The framework she created for personal and social change – The Work That Reconnects – was one of my first anchors. She created the term the Great Turning to describe the shift from the Industrial Growth Society to a life-sustaining civilization. Michael Bischoff introduced me to Joanna Macy's work when I was just out of college. Her work has become part of the foundational fabric of who I am and created a context for how I sought out the other teachers I've named above. I now directly engage with her work less, but feel like I am working towards different aspects of the Great Turning with each of my teachers.



Now how about you?

Who have been your important teachers?

5

THE MEANING OF WISDOM DANCES

Just as women's ritual dances have many layers of meaning, so does the name Wisdom Dances.

Wisdom Dances began with the desire to give life to women's ritual dances from the Balkans, Greece, and Asia Minor. I sensed that these dances could teach me how to become a wise grandmother. These dances teach how to be in community and what sustainability really feels like. They cultivate an experience of felt understanding, a deep inner knowing. Because these dances had a special power to awaken wisdom within, the name Wisdom Dances felt right.

I also liked that Wisdom Dances could have a double meaning, suggesting that Wisdom (*n*) dances (*v*).

I wasn't sure what Wisdom was, but it rang true. Over time I've come to appreciate that Wisdom Dances is as much about Wisdom as it is about dance.

Wisdom can mean many things. There is the wisdom of old age, or the wisdom of intellectual understanding becoming in-the-bones knowing. There is also a larger definition of Wisdom, which, in the words of Cynthia Bourgeault, is the “science of spiritual transformation.”¹



At first I was surprised by her use of the word “science,” which makes me think of physics, chemistry, and biology. But science more broadly, according to the Oxford Dictionary, means “a systematically organized body of knowledge on a particular subject.” The American Heritage Dictionary defines science as knowledge “based on observation, description, experimental investigation and theoretical explanation of phenomena.”

There are patterns in spiritual practice that can be observed. In fact, Bourgeault writes that “no matter which spiritual path you pursue, the nuts and bolts of transformation wind up looking pretty much the same: surrender, detachment, compassion, forgiveness.”

Women’s Ritual Dances as a Wisdom Tradition

Laura Shannon observes that “for thousands of years, the patterns and movements of traditional ritual dances have encoded information in non-verbal, symbolic ways, passing on wisdom through the joyful experience of collective movement. For this reason, I see these dances as a kind of women’s mystery school.”²



Photo by Heidi Mae Niska

I have dedicated the past ten years to making accessible the wisdom encoded in women’s ritual dances. Each class becomes a sacred ground for engaging the body, mind and spirit. Because the dances contain wisdom for moving through both the seasons of the year and the seasons of life, we developed many seasonal dance celebrations.

Our annual dance cycle includes:

- Mid-January water blessing
- Baba Marta Day celebration at the beginning of March
- Spring Equinox Celebration
- Earth Day Celebration
- Mid-Summer Celebration
- All Soul’s Day Celebration of the Dark Mysteries
- Winter Solstice Celebration

Newcomer students need to experience a full cycle of the annual celebrations in order to get a complete picture of the mysteries contained in the dances. It is necessary to dance through the entire dance cycle for two to three years before one can begin to internalize the teachings.

Following page: Images from the Annual Dance Cycle

Top row: January winter water blessing, including launching ice lanterns in the river (2020). Baba Marta day celebration at the beginning of March (2021).

Middle row: Spring Equinox Celebration (2018) and Earth Day Celebration (2022)

Bottom row: Mid-Summer Celebration (2019), All Souls' Day Celebration (2019), and Winter Solstice Celebration (2019).



The Wisdom of Qigong

Qigong is an ancient science of transformation. Because of its focus on physical as well as spiritual healing, it has an extremely well developed metaphysical base of knowledge. Master Lin created Spring Forest Qigong to make that knowledge accessible, practical, and effective.

I didn't set out to be a qigong healer or teacher when I began Wisdom Dances. But I find qigong's healing power irresistible. I lead two qigong practice groups, teach the Spring Forest Level One course, and get deep satisfaction from helping others as a qigong healer.



Top: Healing Waters Qigong at Lake Hiawatha Park, 2018, photo by Emily Jarrett Hughes. Bottom: Offering water blessed by the Healing Waters Qigong Practice Group to Lake Hiawatha, 2017, photo by Sue Cochrane.

Qigong is my most intimate teacher of how Wisdom works. Laura Shannon taught me to approach women's ritual dances as tools for healing and transformation. The more I know about how healing and transformation works from my study of qigong, the more I'm able to activate these qualities in the dances. Qigong has been an invaluable resources for "cracking the code" and accessing the information that has passed on entirely within symbols in the oral tradition.

Wisdom's Nature is a Dance



Embroidery representing the harmonization of opposites.

Photo : Canva

Transformation is always a bit of a mystery – that's why humans can't stop studying it. Where we are stuck in life or most embroiled in conflict, that is often where we most long for transformation. Wisdom teaches that transformation does not happen by "winning" some battle of the will or on the battlefield. It comes through a mysterious presence of a third, reconciling force. Wisdom teaches us how to neutralize the tension between our motivation and our resistance and find a way forward. This is a three way dance with Mystery.

Wisdom itself seems to dance through time. Bourgeault observes there are “mysterious gaps in the linear story of Wisdom. It seems to go underground for a while; one loses the thread. Then, in ways inexplicable to linear causality, it pops up again. It re-creates itself over and over, so it seems, in the hands and hearts of those who have been taught (or discovered on their own) how to listen and see. It never really goes away, and it always comes back in a fresh new form, customized to the conditions of the world.”

Wisdom Dances is a proclamation, “Wisdom dances!” Wisdom emerges through dancing with it. Theologian Nathan Mitchell wrote, “Wisdom is not something hases impart to have-nots. It arises from mutuality, from dialogue and exchange, from listening with the ear of the heart.



Emily Jarrett Hughes (2021)
Photo by Kelechi Uchegbu

Let your life be a dance with Wisdom. It is a dance of joy, healing, and transformation.

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- 1 *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming An Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart*, by Cynthia Bourgeault, (2003) Josey-Bass
 - 2 *Women’s Ritual Dances and the Nine Touchstones of Goddess Spirituality – Part One* by Laura Shannon, Feminism and Religion Blog, November 3, 2018.

6

THE WISDOM TEACHINGS

Wisdom Dances is so much more than a dance class! Wisdom Dances is a contemporary dance-based wisdom school with ancient roots.

With immense gratitude, my approach is based on Laura Shannon’s original research on the common symbolic language within women’s ritual dances, music, costume/textiles, and myth. She has come to “see these dances as a kind of women’s mystery school,” and “living inheritance of indigenous European wisdom with direct and active roots in early egalitarian matriarchal cultures of Neolithic Europe.”¹

This ancient dance lineage mixes with our present time and Minnesota context, becoming a contemporary wisdom school. At our core, we practice women’s ritual dances from the Balkans, Greece, and Asia Minor. Students learn:

- The dance steps and dance style. As renowned dance teacher Steve Kotansky often says, “Dances are 10% steps and 90% style.”
- The geography and political history associated the dances.
- The meaning of dance songs and introductory singing.
- How to “read” the costumes and textiles associated in the dances
- How the symbols connect with myths
- Traditions for celebrating the turning of the seasons and rites of passage



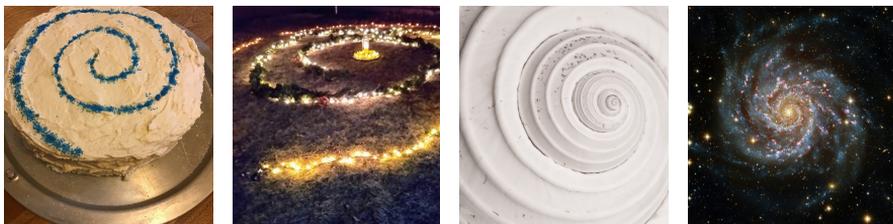
Photos by Emily Jarrett Hughes



Seeds of wisdom - Photo by Emily Jarrett Hughes

Deep study of the dance helps people:

- Come into relationship with their own body, ancestors, future generations, community, the natural world, and the Sacred.
- Activate, cultivate, and express life energy through the body.
- Energetically mediate between the physical and spiritual realms through posture, dance, and leadership.
- Share leadership and power.
- Align with the rhythm of life, death, and rebirth.
- Find their place in myths and sacred stories that speak to humanity's highest purpose.
- Attune to inner knowing and guidance.
- Become comfortable with difference and paradox.
- Awaken non-dual consciousness.
- Move through loss and change with grace.
- Live with generosity, mutuality, and hospitality.
- Powerfully transmit love and care for others and planet.



Celebration cake and winter solstice spiral mirroring spiraling life energy in shells and galaxies. Photos by Emily Jarrett Hughes, Adobe, and NASA.

The collective joy of dance activates the wisdom teaching. We learn through the experience of moving through the cycles repeatedly over time. More formalized wisdom teaching may come in the next ten years of Wisdom Dances.

Let's dance!

¹ See *Women's Ritual Dances and the Nine Touchstones of Goddess Spirituality – Part One* by Laura Shannon on the Feminism and Religion blog, November 3, 2018.



**Come! Enter a door to aliveness,
healing and transformation!**

Photo: Dancing at Dodge Nature Center 2013, by Jennifer Larson



**A contemporary, dance-based
wisdom school with ancient roots.**

*Now, sweet one,
Be wise.
Cast all your votes
for Dancing!*

-Hafiz