

“Yeah, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me...”

From 1993-96, I performed **Alive at the Edge: Field Notes from an Endangered Species**, a solo performance ceremony based on my experience living with HIV. When I reflect on that time now, I realize the piece was a form of “traditional medicine” for both me and my community. This was in the years right before effective treatment was available, and there was not a lot of hope in the air. Alive became my travelling ministry as I moved around the United States and Europe, offering this piece to awaken feelings and stimulate dialogue. The witnesses joined me on the journey; in this sacred space of invocation and evocation, people shared their stories, their memories of loved ones lost, and their hopes and fears about the epidemic.

*(From Program Notes) **Alive at the Edge** is a ceremonial journey through the emotional, spiritual and political landscape provoked by living with AIDS, immune suppression and cultural repression. Using my body’s expression as the vehicle for this journey (dance, gesture, sound, text), I reflect upon homophobia, mind/body splits, environmental decay and soul loss as co-factors in AIDS.*

Every seven minutes someone in this country dies of AIDS. We all know these statistics and at a certain point grow numb to the reality. Every seven minutes in the performance there is a blackout as I extinguish a candle to mark someone’s actual death. This rhythm of darkness and light interrupts and highlights a variety of personal and collective voices from the AIDS pandemic - voices challenging our belief systems and feelings about disease, healing, sexuality and spirituality. This piece is a ritual/prayer in the traditional sense: an invocation, an exorcism, and a healing that invites audience participation.

“Alive” emerged after a pivotal experience in September 1993. I attended a workshop in Oregon with neo-Jungian therapist Arnold Mindell. Mindell has created Dreambody Process Work, where he explores the confluence of dreams, physical symptoms and cognitive process. He believes the body “dreams up” symptoms as a way for the unconscious to get the conscious mind’s attention. What I discovered in that week was that I had put my own artistry on hold as my focus had been on being a movement therapist and educator. I became clear that being a dancer again was the key to my passion and necessary for my life-force.

Coming home from the workshop, my client Steve, who was only 27 years old, died of AIDS. His death left me feeling helpless and angry, and pushed me over the edge into creating this performance. It was clear I needed a channel for my feelings, and all the material I had

absorbed in this epidemic over the previous 6 years, when I became much more involved by leading on-going groups for people with HIV and cancer. All these stories and conflicting feelings, and the psychological and spiritual fallout from the epidemic was at the heart of this human disease, which had become overlooked by the quest for a medical cure.

“When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I feel afraid.” - Audre Lorde (black lesbian poet and activist)

In each performance, I had to confront my own vulnerability and fear, my attachments to outcome and approval. It became a form of spiritual practice to just show up and see what wanted to emerge with each different environment and audience. The spontaneous moments that had been successful in prior performances very often could not be duplicated. The attachment to repetition very often interrupted the flow, challenging me to stay with the risk of what was happening in that moment rather than flee to the safety of predictability.

Trusting the ritual space of performance, I became aware of my connection to the stream of human life, to all people who have danced in pain and joy, and who have bust the bubble of their small selves to be intimately connected to a larger Mystery. I felt called to do this piece by that Mystery. Once I began the journey, there was a momentum fueled by personal passion and social necessity that carried me despite the misgivings and doubts of my small self.

As the quote of the Zuni Indians hanging in Barbara Mettler's Tuscon dance studio says, *"We do not dance for ourselves. We dance for the life of our community.* If art as a healing ritual can push us over our comfortable edges, individually and collectively, then yes, it is important to continue making dances for ourselves and others - whether it is for one witness, a group, or a community. With culture geared towards materialism and diminishing human contact, dance making feels like an act of courageous necessity. It is a part of our human heritage that must not be lost.

Writing this article and reflecting on the power of the dance convinced me it was time to perform again. I will turn 45 in December and want to use the occasion of this turning of the wheel to dance for witnesses. I have invited other Bay Area performers to join me in this evening, which will be a benefit for Julia Butterfly, the young activist who has been tree-sitting in an old-growth redwood to protect the Headwaters Forest for exactly 2 years on my birthday. Her commitment and faith have inspired me once again to get involved beyond the comfort of the studio and the therapy room - this time to advocate for the life of other species. If my dance can give me life,

and at least one other person in that room can be touched by that moment of embodied spirit,
isn't this reason enough to continue to dance in a sacred way?

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