

Long Dance
Opening Ground
by Connor Sauer © 2005

March, 1984, found me living on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, married to Curt Sauer, a new mother of R. Damian, standing in a circle of nearly 70 people that a mentor friend and I had called together from all over the country. We were gathered to create and experience a three day ceremony called Long Dance. Present as Elders and blessing the event were Wallace and Gracie Black Elk of the Lakota people, Vince and Edna Stogan of the Musqueam Band of the Coastal Salish people. Carolyn Tawangyama of the Hopi people had not been able to come. My mentor friend Charles Lawrence had arranged for them to come.

Charles had come into my life by way of a weekend with Jean Houston in Salt Lake two summers before, and his involvement in a Paul Winter recording river trip through the Canyon the previous spring. He, along with my husband Curt, and Curt's college friend Bob Rummel, were the men who brought me concrete ways of discovering Aboriginal Indigenous and First Nation ways of mindful, deeply awake relationship to the Earth and her cycles of life. Celebrating Solstices in Vermont, growing my own food to eat, dancing to rhythms of middle eastern doumbek drums, kneeling beside Buddhist carved prayer rocks all along the foot roads of the high Himalayas had all opened me to that possibility.

My deep passion for the Earth came from my parents providing me a childhood filled with neighborhood woods, summer camp, hiking, sailing, swimming in lakes and mountain streams, downhill ski racing, vacations in Vermont with my cousins, and a six week trip through the Western National Parks when I was ten. In 1960 the road through the Navaho Reservation that took us to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon was dirt. In 1970 I lived on a dirt road that lead to the old farmhouse where I lived on a dairy farm outside of Burlington, Vermont, when I began celebrating the Solstices in community, gardening, and canning food the way my paternal grandparents had in that Vermont soil for most of their lives.

All throughout the late 1950's and early 1960's, I gathered in "girl circles". We dressed up in historic museum costumes and had high tea, we researched foreign countries, creating costumes, food and skits about those countries for a production to raise money for one our God-mothers. She was the only

woman MD sailing on a U.S. ship of mercy the S.S Hope, bringing aid to Southeast Asia. We broke swimming records at age 10, swimming across lake Cayuga and back, our Moms rowing support boats. We shared each other's different religious holidays, we served plates of hor's d'oevres at gatherings of international diplomats and professors. I began learning the Woman's Way at an early age from women who changed the world and were at home for their children. That was neither idyllic nor perfect, and yet it was extraordinary. Our mothers were the generation who stood on the shoulders of the women who brought us the Vote. And they were the generation who struggled under the weight of juggling or foregoing personal career dreams and the desire to be home tending the hearth for family and rooted-support of children.

It was from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in 1981 that I launched a life long dream of a solo trek in the Himalayas and my search for the Holy Grail of Shangri-La. In India I crossed paths with a great Indian Sant Mat Master named Charan Singh. In Nepal I trekked high into the Khumbu, staying in tea houses, listening to the stories of the high country people who lived close on the edge of starvation and survival. I was served dinner there one evening by a young woman who had given birth to her child in that hut just that morning. Her husband was leading an expedition, and she needed to continue tending the hearth for the money of foreign guests. She was beautiful, strong and radiant. My eyes welled up with tears when she handed me my bowl of dinner.

It was on the South Rim, during that Long Dance in 1984 while listening to a prayer of Wallace Black Elk, that I began a decades long inner journey of weaving the Mystical worlds and teachings of East, my upbringing in a Christian West, my own Indigenous roots in Celtic country, and Aboriginal Indigenous Wisdom Teachings from American soil, all together in my heart, mind, soul, and essence of being.

Woven throughout those decades was the dilemma of being in a woman's body, the world-wide historical and cultural subservience and abuse of women and children, the competitive and destructive behavior between women, the brutal striving to make it in a man's business world, and the growing trend of women leaving the home hearth to forge a new self-definition outside the home, and the often consequent emotional abandonment of children. I felt restlessness, yearning, hope and despair. I found myself calling women together in small circles to open our hearts and

talk deeply about our inner lives stuffed away below layers of emotional posturing. There had to be another way, a modern way of wise, respectful, creative, collaborative living.

The evening was cold and crisp when we first gathered in one of the meeting rooms on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in March 1984. There were close to 70 of us gathered from all over the country to experience the first and only Long Dance ever to take place on the South Rim. Superintendent Richard Marks had made extraordinary exceptions to allow this gathering of people and Native American Elders of different traditions to collaborate on creating ceremony that honored the Earth and holy places of the First Nations people of North America. Many of America's National Parks are those holy lands. There was an incredible moment when Vince Stogan, revered Elder of the Musqueam-Coastal Salish people, Wallace Black elk, revered Elder of the Lakota Sioux people, and Richard Marks, respected Superintendent of Grand Canyon National Park, all stood in different parts of the room, facing each other in the circle gathered. There was an exchange of gratitude, respect, honoring and gifts that created the foundation for a life-changing event over the course of that weekend.

In the middle of the night, Long Dance 1984, tucked away in the bottom of the Kolb Studio on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, a dream of Woman's Way Long Dance was begun. It was somewhere around 3:00a.m. when a young man named Eric Empey, attending the Dance with his mom Bobbie Empey, stepped up to a large Taos drum while most of the adults were resting and dreaming. He began to play that drum in such a way as to draw me into the power of the drums. I had been around conga drums, doumbek drums with my Middle Eastern dance, and drums played in Sweat Lodges. I had not yet had the courage to begin playing them myself. So I sat beside Eric, as though auntie and nephew, began to play a ceremonial drum, and together we journeyed to un-traveled territory for me. My own new young son was home in the care of his father at night, and a friend Ruthie Stoner during the day. I heard my own heartbeat in that drum. I became that heartbeat, one with the drum. I remembered that I had heard a heartbeat for nine months while in my mother's womb. I realized that each person in the world had grown into form in the waters of their mother's womb, listening to the drum of her heartbeat. It was then and there that I wondered what it would be like to experience this kind of a gathering with women only. What could we create in this context for modern times on our own terms, from

within ourselves, not needing to fit ourselves into a culture and structure created primarily on the terms of men's needs and desires.

I had been participating in Sweat Lodges, Pipe Ceremonies, Give-Away, and the making of Intention Bundles or prayer ties since 1974. I had not, until then, been in the presence and power of such Traditional Elders and Government Officials all at once. Being held, respected, and serving community that way, was the opening in me of the Dream of Woman's Way Long Dance. It took five years and my arrival in Port Angeles, WA for the seeds of that dream to find soil in which to grow.

The Beginning of Woman's Way Long Dance

In September on the Olympic Peninsula, at Camp David Jr., on the shores of lake Crescent, in the middle of Olympic National Park, there is a gathering of women that takes place every year that is called Womanfest. In the fall of 1988 I was invited to attend that gathering, and being new to the community, I accepted with great excitement.

I had heard there was an "open mike" night on Saturday, so I brought my Taos Family of drums that I had collected over 5 years, hoping for the opportunity to invite some of the women into a drumming experience with me that night. When everyone had taken their turn, I stepped forward, introduced myself, and told the women I had brought some drums, wondering if there were some women who might want to drum with me. I made mention of the history of drumming, the protocol of drum etiquette, etc. and that my main emphasis was on the experience of drums that night. Most of the women were interested. So within minutes, all the drums were placed in the middle of the large gathering room, lights were dimmed, candles were lit, new drummers took their places, and we were off and running with just a few introductions. We took turns on the different drums; we danced, sang, and reveled together until around 1:00 a.m. I have always wondered how those drums sounded on the far shores of the lake that night.

Within a week of Womanfest, a woman named Rhonda Karls approached me and said that around 12 women were interested in doing more drumming, and wondered if I would teach them. I said yes, of course, and the unfolding of Woman's Way Long Dance began.

We met in living rooms and the circle became larger. We met in larger living rooms and the circle became larger. We met in community rooms of churches and the circle became larger. Eventually we began to meet in the Dry Creek Grange outside of Port Angeles, WA, and that became the meeting place of monthly drum circles.

As we met and began to draw ceremony into our gatherings, I told the story of my experience of the Long Dance on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, and dream of creating an all-women's gathering of a similar nature. It was decided that this dream would come alive. Over that first year different possible gathering places were explored. I found myself being excited and intimidated at the same time, and wasn't sure why. One woman, Pat Cramer, kept insisting that I come look at a remote place in the foothills of the Olympics, up Palo Alto Rd., just outside Sequim, Wa., a nearby town of Port Angeles. Pat loaded me into her car one day and drove me there. I stepped out into the most magnificent field of gently waving wild green grass, surrounded by tall Cedars and the surrounding mountains. The beauty of it was so piercing that I had to sit down. In that moment I burst into tears and had a great meltdown. In answering Pat's gentle inquiry into my well-being, I was able to determine that I was overwhelmed at the prospect of leading 35-50 women through such a big and profound experience when I was the only one who knew anything about what was to take place.

Sitting in that green field, listening to my heart, feeling the earth hold me, breathing deeply, looking around me, seeing tall cedars, gentle waving grass, soaring birds drifting through, puffy white clouds floating high above with a cobalt blue sky beyond them, my eyes alighted on an abandoned junk pile in a far corner of the field. Then they rose to a distant mountain where the whole side of it was ripped clean of all plant life in a clear cut. I knew in that instant that the time for this Long Dance had arrived, and it was time for women to gather in this way. I took a big breath and told myself to just begin. And so we did.

The invitation to the first Woman's Way Long Dance said this:

“The Long Dance is about Power, Mystery, and unfolding. It is about having ritual serve our deepest longings for purpose and wholeness. It, in this case, is about gathering with women and entering into sisterhood together. It is about facing the unknown, calling upon our deeps, committing to a path of service, first to ourselves to gain bearing, and then reaching out to others. It

is the discovery of how very much we need each other at times, and how strong we can be when needed. It is learning how fine it can be to stand alone in our brilliance, claiming our dewdrop of uniqueness in the web of relationships.

It is time for us to remember the wisdom of our ancestors, and use it on the path of knowledge, technology, and science. We have not been here before, all of us. We have not stood side by side with billions of people on this planet at the same time, consuming ourselves into oblivion, with such possibility at our fingertips. The question of how to create a planetary community that works successfully, and respects individuals and differences at the same time, is a profound one. A new vision is in the making, a new way of walking lightly on the Earth, the courage to break away and see things as they really are, and push forward into the unknown. The time for pretense is gone. It is time for us all to walk steadily into our healing, and understand that possibility is born in ourselves.”

The very first Long Dance was two days long. We gathered on gorgeous land far away from any town, being served by the amenities of one hose and constructed backcountry style latrines. We made intention necklaces together, a First Nation form of “writing” one’s intentions clearly. We opened the nightlong drumming, singing and dancing through prayers of gratitude, swirling in the smoke of burning sage and cedar, lighting a fire to warm us. The drums never lagged, our singing was sweet and rich. Hips swayed, feet planted steps of embodying our Intentions carried in bundles of color around our necks. Our arms and hands carried wood, played drums, wiped away tears of joy, held flashlights to illumine camp tasks of the night.

Just after first morning light, we feasted together. When we gathered for the exchange of Give-Away, we burned our Intention necklaces, surrendering our focus to the Mystery of manifestation. After each woman had taken her turn, we ceremonially marked the closing of our time together.

Woman’s Way Long Dance had begun. It moves through us like a current of truth and yearning in the rapids of life. It calls to women who are ready to live more deeply than most around them. It answers the question of how to see ourselves in the mirror of life. It births fierce courage, and allows women the power of the sacred feminine to breathe through every daily action. It demands a journey of awakening that unfolds compassion. This Long Dance is an Initiation into the Women’s Menstrual Blood Mysteries, the way every

man and woman is born into this world, the way all that exists is created, and foment an experience of community that is co-created by all, year to year to year. It is about the divine sacred “we” and how that can hold the divine sacred “me”. We mentor and cultivate Wisdom, Character, Truth, Integrity, Self-Awakening, Courage, and ways to embody who we are in our deepest essence. There is no dogma, nor required beliefs. Many are from very divergent spiritual paths. We are hidden away, connected, rich in our love of sisterhood, and discovery of how extraordinary our ordinary lives truly are. From here, we each serve life on Earth in the deepest possible way.