

Low Self-Esteem and The Search for the Goddess Within

I was first introduced to bellydance in college. I was taking a humanities course and had to do a semester project. The assignment was to find an art form we had not yet experienced and learn what we could about it and report on it at the semester's end. I really wanted to learn more about bellydance but I was overweight and had some serious self-esteem issues and shyness. It was a tough decision to put myself out there like that. However, I knew that if I was ever going to be happy with being me, there was no way I could back down from this challenge no matter how scared I was. So, I enrolled in a community education class. Phase one of my plan had commenced. I had the task set before me. 8 weeks of bellydance classes, a recital, a performance for my humanities class and one really thick shell to break through. I must have been insane. I wasn't really prepared for what would happen next. This seemingly haphazard decision would be one of the great blessings of my life. Here are a few of the bonuses I discovered along the way...

The Art of Breathing

“In the end it all comes down to the art of breathing.” Martha Graham

Lack of oxygen adversely affects the body on a cellular level. As with all types of physical activity and our desire to continue living, proper breathing is important. You may ask, since when is breathing an art? The Yogi's believed that if you do

your breathing through your mouth you are cheating yourself by not allowing the absorption of prana (energy) from the air. Following this philosophy, proper breathing would be slow, deep breathing through the nose. The resulting supply of oxygen is essential for vitality, immune system function, ATP production, blood purification and circulation, and deep relaxation needed for sleep. Bellydance teaches these quintessential methods and encourages the use of controlled breathing in such movements as lower abdominal isolations, diaphragm isolations and flutters. Proper breathing also aids us in maintaining good posture by allowing room to expand the breathing down into our abdomen. This creates spinal alignment and in turn beautiful dance position. But to me the Art of Breathing is something more, something metaphorical. It is about allowing yourself to BE. Letting go of all of the crap that is heaped upon you daily (mostly by yourself) and just being satisfied in the moment you are experiencing. Right now stop, close your eyes, relax and do nothing else but breathe. See what I mean? The Art of breathing makes all the difference.

To Infinity and Beyond ...

To most of us the figure 8 is known to be the symbol for infinity. I once read an article in which the author said "I interpret it to mean, not only the eternal dance between endings and beginnings, but also being able to tap into all that there is: the beginning, the end, and everything in between."

To those of us in the bellydance world figure 8's are no strangers. They are drilled time and time again to promote their perfection. They are the basics, the foundation of many

of the movements we perform. We know them well. But what is not so well known is the energetic harmony they bring to the mind/body connection. Master Healer and author of "Energy Medicine", Donna Eden teaches that the body's energy has a natural tendency to move from left to right then right to left. This movement helps keep us in tune with the body's energy, increasing it and affecting coordination, comprehension and concentration. Bellydancers must have some amazing energetic harmony. Who knew?

A Body Beautiful

"Many people treat their bodies as if they were rented from Hertz--something they are using to get around in but nothing they genuinely care about understanding."

Chungliang Al Huang

I grew up hating, I mean really HATING my body. I have always had a chubby body and until a few years ago I thought that meant I was in some way inferior.. There are probably other women who feel this way also. We are our own worst critics and imperfections that seem catastrophic to us might not even get noticed by someone else. Why do we treat ourselves this way? I would like to say it is all the fault of our corrupt society blah, blah, blah. But the truth is that we are self-centered and too concerned about how things reflect on us. Please understand, I am not saying this is wrong. It just is what it is. What I really want to say is this: I am NOT my body! You are NOT your body! The body is just a tool for you to employ. Perhaps, if we could understand that when we treat ourselves with respect and nurturing the energy of our body changes. Until then consider that your body is an instrument for you to dance with. It is beautiful regardless of its size, shape or ability. Although we like to look our best, does that mean that we have to look like that

model in Cosmo? I want to look MY best and my best is different than your best or the Cosmo model's best. I am unique in my mind and in my looks and that is as it should be. Love your body, it is an amazing work of art and architecture, even if it isn't perfect.

Yin (and Yang)

It is rare in today's culture to find an embracing of femininity. I find this aspect one of the most appealing of the bellydance community. In our society it is not uncommon for women to be afraid of or even despise their own femininity. This mindset is causing a great many energy problems in the female body and in turn the feminine energy of the earth.

Some examples of this are the so called "female problems" that are being made manifest. Diseases such as breast and ovarian cancers, menstrual cycle malfunctions and infertility are revealing themselves to us in hopes that we will take notice and shift our consciousness toward nurturing and healing. Some women believe that the term "feminine" equates with weak and helpless. What seems to have been forgotten is that each of us has both Yin (feminine) and Yang (masculine). We cannot have one without the other. We have forgotten how to honor our womanhood. Denying your true nature is like cutting off your nose to spite your face. It is natural for us to be softer and more emotional. It is critical for us to understand our place as the feminine, especially at a time when the masculine or warrior energy of the planet is wreaking havoc.

In the book "Woman Who Run with the Wolves", author Clarissa Pinkola Estes says: "Within every woman there is a wild and natural creature, a powerful force filled with good instincts, passionate creativity and ageless knowing. Her name is wild woman but

she is an endangered species. Though the gifts of wildish nature come to us at birth, society's attempt to civilize us into rigid roles has plundered this treasure and muffled the deep, life-giving messages of our own souls. Without "wild woman" we become overly domesticated, fearful, uncreative, trapped." I know a lot of women like this, including myself.

In nature, the purpose of winter is to allow us to slow down and look within. There is wisdom in that. We are so busy trying to meet our obligations (real and perceived) to our families, jobs and communities that we have precious little time for introspection. If we are to find creative solutions for our lives we must re-integrate our masculine and feminine aspects to be whole. We must remember "wild woman". As dancers, and as women we can be strong AND soft, logical AND emotional, driven AND reflective. The time has come for us to accept ourselves and be who we truly are, to be at peace within and without.

THE END?

At the beginning of this journey I did not know who I was. I have now been dancing for several years and am grateful for the lessons I have learned about passion and living life to its fullest. Bellydance is still stigmatized by some as being sinful or dirty. To those people I would say, you always find what you are looking for. I have only sought the joy and the grace that this dance form is. Learning to dance has played a huge part in my learning to accept myself as good enough, just the way I am. Of course this isn't the end of my journey but from my experience I have learned more of who I am. I am the breath of life. I am the infinite. I am beautiful. I am the feminine. I AM THE GODDESS.

There's no turning back now.