

One Teacher's Opinion: Belly Dancing with my Daughter

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Tava teaches belly dance in southwestern Connecticut. Visit her Web site at www.reikiarts.com/dance

by Mary Kestenbaum

"In ancient Egypt, the ab, one of the seven souls, was supposed to come directly from the mother's heart, in the form of holy lunar blood that descended into the womb to take the shape of her child. The hieroglyphic sign for this eminently matriarchal idea was a dancing figure, representing the inner dance of life perceived in the heartbeat. As long as the dance continued, life went on."

The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects, Barbara G. Walker

The dance between my daughter and I began in a small apartment in San Francisco when she was a tiny little girl and we spent our Saturday mornings blasting pop music and dancing. Sometimes I would dance with her in my arms and other times we danced wildly apart. Even then Tava was exotic with her long, curly blonde-brown hair and beautiful green eyes.

Our dancing continues now, more than 20 years later, across the country, as she introduces me to an ancient form of dance. A dance which I now know was a women's ritual that predates written history. The dance has had many names in its long history but at this time, in this place, it is called belly dance. Even now, it's hard for me to believe I'm participating in something so strange and unfamiliar.

As I remember our times in San Francisco, it seems we've come full circle. Returning to dance through my daughter is a gift that began when she moved near me and began teaching classes. I felt an obligation to help her with this new endeavor but it would be an enormous dilemma for me. I was extremely self-conscious. After years of pummeling my body with weights, walking, running, aerobic dance and any other method that might rid me of my generous curves, moving my hips just was not part of my repertoire. I approached my new interest with a mix of embarrassment and humor which turned out to be exactly right as my friends and I poked fun at each other's attempts to "undulate" and "get in touch with our inner shimmies." When the series ended, I felt - with relief - that I'd fulfilled my obligation.

To my own surprise, I found myself missing the classes. I would notice the day and time and think how nice it would be to leave the house and do something just for me. I was at a turning point in my own life. My younger children were growing up and it was time for me to venture out. When I signed on for a second session, I noticed the other women in the class had improved dramatically. Their movements had become natural. They were relaxed and enjoying themselves. I stayed in the back of the classes confused by the footwork and utterly frustrated by my attempts to pretzel myself in belly dance shapes or float my arms in snake-like movements. It was during one of those self-loathing episodes that I remembered the San Francisco apartment. I remembered there was a time when I didn't think about dancing... I didn't try..I just moved and laughed. As I stood there in my time warp, I realized how much I wanted that freedom again.

As the session progressed I watched the other women, and I began to notice the warmth between the dancers - how they supported each other with tips on making movements more fluid, how they applauded a new student attempting a new move, how they helped me. I watched their movements change from self-conscious attempts to beautiful, rhythmic, and feminine movements. I watched my daughter gently coax, nurture, and celebrate each woman's progress. I began looking forward to class, not just for the dance but also for the mood in the room.

At the end of that session, Tava planned a performance for all of her dancers from various classes. Although I still didn't have the confidence to perform, I went to support my fellow students. Watching the women of various ages, sizes, backgrounds and abilities perform together was very moving - something that is rare to see - diverse women coming together to celebrate their achievement. The night was a success. Everyone hugged and complimented each other.

The next day I ran into another mother who had attended the performance. "Are you Tava's mother?" she asked. I nodded yes. "I love your daughter." I asked her if she knew her well and she said she'd only met her the night before. She said the

confidence and joy she'd seen on the faces of the dancers was proof enough that my daughter must be a very special person.

While I certainly would agree that my daughter is very special, I also understand that what she is teaching is special – not just the music and movement, but the tradition of support and community. I love watching the change that comes over women when they've come to class a few times, when they know there will be no judgment – just laughter, music, and friendship.

While I'm still hoping my "inner shimmy" will reveal itself, I am aware that I've already found many answers in my attempts. I know that the process of surrendering all the baggage about my body and my roles in life will be the key to the next phase. I know that "trying" is not the answer, but letting go – finding the freedom to make mistakes, to enjoy the process – that is the real quest. As I keep searching for that feeling in class, I realize I'm looking for it in life also. It's part of that inner dance that keeps us moving and keeps us alive. The shimmy may never happen and that will be okay because now I know it was never really about the perfection of the movement, it was about finding the freedom to move through my life. ☞

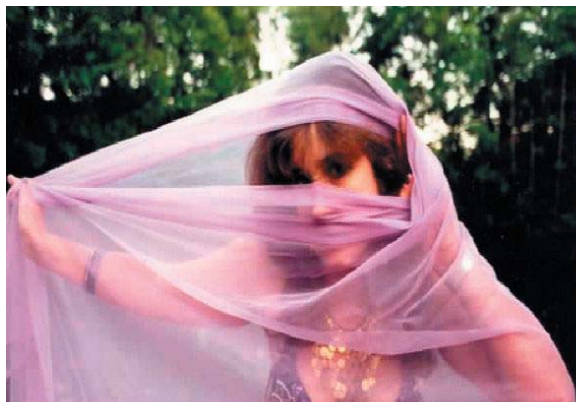


Photo by David Brown

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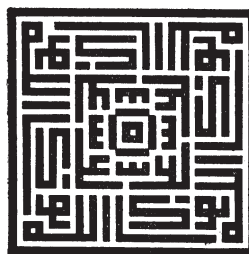
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Sacred Women, Sacred Dance, Iris J. Stewart



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