

Some closing thoughts

by Allegra Fuller
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Thank you for giving me the permission to share several minutes of thoughts with you, because there is a good possibility that this is the last time I may be with you.

I treasure my membership in the [Ethnochoreology] Study Group. You are a very special group of people, both thinkers and doers, but you must have courage, because I believe there is a tremendous challenge particularly addressed to you now, a challenge which you must take on.

We are confronted with the dichotomy between culturalism, with the enriched identity of shared worldviews, and racism, where the sense of self-identity expresses itself in fear and anger towards others. Almost every area of the world is in turmoil because of the confrontation between those two points of view.

Perhaps I should start by reminding ourselves that the concept of culture, and therefore cultural differences, is relatively new. It was introduced into the English language only in the 1880s by Mathew Arnold and Edward B. Tylor. During the 1890s the term “culture” was used in the singular, and was synonymous with “civilization”. The fieldwork of anthropologist Franz Boas led him to perceive cultures, in the plural, and to appreciate that each one had a unity, coherence, and history of its own.

I feel it is extremely important that we confront dance not as performance, not

as an art form, not as entertainment, but as a **way of knowing** for the dancer, and as a **body of knowledge** for the observer.

Hilda Kuper, late Professor Emeritus at UCLA, has said: “Dance is one of the richest expressions of human culture, but also is one of the most difficult to analyse and interpret. It is easy to observe actions and to miss meanings. Dance can be interpreted in various ways and at different levels of perception; and it is necessary to know not only the dances, but also when and why and by whom they are danced, in order to understand what is communicated in the dance. To try to fathom the depths of “the dance”, or to explain adequately a single performance in a different culture, requires a grasp of the way of life of the people by whom the particular dances were created and accepted”.

Dance brings together the conceptual and the physical, the mind and the body, into an experiential whole. I know of no other activity that does this as fully and completely. This suggests why dance on a worldwide basis appears critical to the functioning of mankind.

In the early 1990s a cover story in *Time* magazine discussed what gets lost when homogeneous cultures disappear, and the Earth Summit of 1992 urged us to wonder if the ecological issues raised by global warming and rainforest depletion, may not also be applicable to cultural issues. What are their cultural equivalents? As we come to know what we are doing to the environment, we may also discover what we are doing to our human inhabitation. The *Time* article went as far as to use the term “cultural holocaust”. It stated, “Until quite recently, few in the developed world cared much about this cultural holocaust. The prevailing attitude has been

that Western science, has little to learn from tribal knowledge... [Now] some scientists are beginning to recognize that the world is losing an enormous amount of basic research as indigenous peoples lose their culture and traditions. (We) may someday be struggling to reconstruct this body of wisdom to secure the developed world’s future”.

“What really matters in the struggle for [...] survival is intelligence—the rate at which we are able to learn from past experience”. Rothschild stresses, in using the computer metaphor, that the code is king. “The essence of every biological organism is a strand of DNA code. The essence of every digital system is a string of binary code”. What is the DNA that describes the complex role and function which dance has historically played within cultures? What is the ecosystem that encompasses the experiencing of dancing, the communication through dance, the self-identity gained by dance, the transformation that occurs while dancing?

When we look at country after country, culture after culture, over centuries and millennia (if cave paintings and hieroglyphics are accurate historical sources), why do we see dance at the center of the functioning of a culture? The integrity, the completeness, the fulfilment, the empowerment of a human being in the process of dancing must be readdressed. We need to acknowledge the essential factors unique to this expressive form. We need to develop the means to articulate, not annihilate, the values of dance to human society, to find ways to reintegrate that knowledge within world society. The challenges are tremendous, the task difficult, the demands almost superhuman—but each one of you can do it, and do it *you must*.