

ORIGINAL FLOW: DANCE WITH SHADOW SPIRIT

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From the first moment I stepped foot on the land at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival nearly twenty years ago, I recognized it as sacred ground. The atmosphere was infused with awakened consciousness. There was energetic information coming through everywhere, from everything and everyone.

The festival was a spiritual retreat. I participated in the sweat lodges, smudged performers as they entered the stage for the opening ceremony, made prayers in honor of the four directions every year at the Womyn of Color Tent dedication, led meditations from the Acoustic Stage on Sundays as an emcee, and shared song as a member of the One World Inspirational Choir. Each year this retreat rendered a deeper sense of clarity about my life purpose. The ordinary and the extraordinary of Festival had a profound impact on my life, on and off the land. I had come to rely on Festival to shape the next stage of my inner work.

One of the most impactful experiences emerged from participating in *Evolution* series, a performance ritual presented three times on Acoustic Stage. The *Evolution* series was a unique concept. With a cast of all women of color who were artists, teachers, and healing practitioners, it was meant to provide a psycho-spiritual transformation for both the performers and the audience. As a cast member, my task in *Evolution* was to locate myself in the blueprint of my soul, call forth my deepest yearning, and envision the next stage of unfoldment. From this deep contemplation I had to create a ritual to the blueprint and invoke a new expression, a new way of being in the world. The audience would be invited to participate as sacred witnesses, a powerful internal interactive process that propels energetic movement. In this way, the ceremony would be a communal caldron of personal intention, fueling the fires of actualization. As a woman of color,

being held and supported by other women of color is a true gift. We live in a racist and misogynistic society, and few of us escape some level of internalization. *Evolution* was an invitation to ignite that support and burn through years of negative imprinting.

As I prepared for *Evolution V*, I had a profound experience that bridged the realm of the seen and the unseen, death and rebirth, the healer and the healed. I had an encounter with an Ancestor. She had been with me for years, a shadow-self, and had influenced how I walked in the world. My ability to commune with "spirits" had been developed over several decades; my encounters with Amazonian plant medicine has increased the clarity of this communication as I am often visited by spirit guides, Ancestors, and lost spirits stuck in the astral plane.

My first conscious encounter with this spirit had taken place six months earlier. I had been bothered by a pain in my shoulder for several weeks and sought the aid of a healing practitioner. As the session progressed, she began to make guttural sounds that I felt pulsating through my body. In a trance state, I envisioned a tall, deep-chocolate-complexioned woman with long, thick, black hair. She wore a colorful tunic and long swirling skirt. *I ain't doing nothing*, she fumed in protest. I listened as she detailed the service she had rendered throughout her life. She made healing poultices, she had conjured spells to break bad spells, and spells to bring good fortune. She had been a master, she boasted. She had accomplished great feats for a woman of her means, and yet she had never been appreciated nor honored for her contributions. *I'm not giving no more. That's it*, she concluded. I listened in a curiously unattached manner, but her bitter resentment had taken its toll on me. Could she be the reason I often sat listlessly for hours, getting nothing done all day? Certainly, she had attached herself to me; her righteous indignation lodged into the sinews of my shoulder. I thought that the purpose of this encounter was to bring this shadow spirit to the light and release her. I wanted no part of the anger she harbored. I demanded she leave. My pain completely

vanished. I no longer experienced those long periods of mental paralysis. I thought that was the end of it.

At the Spring Equinox, I began to call forth the theme for my *Evolution* ritual. I was in my fifties and deep in the throes of menopause. I wanted to explore the meaning of being a warrior, an identity I had embraced most of my life. The hormonal changes taking place inside of me were having a softening effect—smoothing my sharp edges. I wanted to evolve into a shaman-warrior, fully confident in the act of knowing, observing, and trusting. *Evolution V* could facilitate the change. I would do a ceremony in celebration of Yoni—the quintessential feminine. I would dance to the four directions with tai-chi-like movements; arms stretched wide, sending and receiving energy from earth and sky, and from each direction, spiraling motions that would activate and anchor my intentions, transmitting energetic frequencies into the audience. Aleah Long, my partner and *Evolution* director, arranged music that easily coaxed my body into the sensual flow I desired, enabling me to sink into my deep, warm yoni center.

I arrived at our first rehearsal with confidence. I had the music and I had the dance, though I was thirty pounds heavier. As I was explaining my theme, my voice was monotone and lacked the excitement with which my piece had been conceived. I attributed it to the fatigue from preparing for the Festival. The year had also been grueling. I hoped that as soon as I heard the music and felt the cool earth beneath my feet in the presence of these powerful priestesses, I would be reenergized. The music started, and I started to dance. My legs felt like I was moving through heavy water, nothing like the sensual flow I had envisioned. The expressionless faces of the women sitting before me increased my discomfort. Seemingly oblivious to my intention, their lack of

responsiveness was devastating. The song finally ended, and I sat back down in deep despair, disappointed beyond words. Over the next few days, it was impossible to shake this state.

One evening, I pleaded with the spirits of the land. "Help me." I had come to Festival with a huge expectation. *Evolution V* was going to be a breakthrough, and I would return home a new person. If only I could talk this out with one of my sister performers—any one of them could have offered a healing balm. But the Festival had begun to swallow them up, and they were nowhere to be found. Stressed, I finally drifted off, hoping that a good night's sleep would be the remedy I needed.

Morning came with no relief. Freaked out, I tried to explain to Aleah: "Something's pushing down on my chest." She was immediately alarmed, reaching for the motel phone. "No, it's not a heart attack. It's something else, like . . . like . . . like a spirit, like someone is—" As I struggled to describe it, clarity began to emerge. "This spirit, this woman, is pushing down on me." She's demanding: *I will sit here on your chest until you get what I'm telling you. Black women are always giving themselves away—taking care of everyone, killing themselves. If you don't stop, I will kill you myself.*

I felt as though I could die in that moment. If I didn't heed her warning, my life was at stake. The pressure that Black women are under as caretakers causes heart attacks, strokes, breast cancer, early onset Alzheimer's, complications from diabetes. Our community had lost many too soon. Many of our icons—Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, June Jordan—were taken this way. I was afraid the same thing would happen to me. My own excellent health was showing signs of decline.

Suddenly I realized the Ancestor that had been lodged in my shoulder was back. She was still very pissed off, but giving voice to her demands helped release me. Could it be that the draining force keeping me feeling locked down and depleted was in fact an ally, an Ancestor, or an elemental created by my own thoughts?

Because during the last few years, I, too, was like that spirit, feeling unappreciated, misunderstood, cheated, and disgraced. As I listened, my fear subsided. I was still in the dark as to what I should do next, but it was clear; what had initially appeared as an adversary was in actuality a mirror-reflection of myself.

I got out of bed; the stagnation had been lifted. I was alive with blood moving through my body and a smile on my face. Leaving the shower, I caught the reflection of my naked body in the mirror. It was crystal clear. I would dedicate my ritual to the Ancestor who wanted to save me. To heal us both, I knew I had to dance in the nude, unashamed, in beauty.

The ritual was now fully formed, but I would need some quiet time to receive the message. Thursday morning I set out for my favorite spot in the woods behind Acoustic Stage with my journal and some sage for clearing my own ego. I had encountered a cove of trees there a few years back. They had served as an Elders Council where I had spoken in another tongue, made life-changing declarations to retrieve my soul. I sat down on the mossy ground, smudged myself with the smoke from the sage, and centered myself. Immediately, she was there. The leaves on the ground moved gently before me. I started to write her words. She appeared as a very old woman, bent over slightly, but strong, with a muslin earth-toned dress, no longer afraid of being snatched away by cold hands and mean faces. She walked with a stick for support, and settled down on a wooden bench. She didn't know how to forgive, but she had put herself in my hands, and through our dance she would be redeemed.

She spoke from many times, past and present, incarnate and disincarnate. She spoke to me and about me. I was her messenger, as she was mine.

I reflect on this life I've had, because it's been hard and filled with the kind of pain no woman wants to talk about, never mind come to some peace.

I reflect on forgiveness. How did we ever survive those times, those unspeakable times, with hands of haters tearing at our insides; those places, supposed to be private and sacred?

I've known lovers but they could never make me feel whole, and ain't no one ever made me feel holy. But today, in this time and in this place, this sister gonna set me free. She asked me, what I want to say to you, and I say, "I wants back the respect and dignity taken from me." She takes my hand, says I've got to dance naked inside a safe circle of sisters, so I can see my own beauty in their eyes.

By the next day, the day of the performance, her presence subsided, and I was left with fearful anticipation. The thought of revealing my imperfect body filled me with trepidation and dread. Yet I completely trusted not only this Spirit, but I also trusted myself. I readied myself for a trembling experience. I would get through it, for I was not dancing just for myself. I was celebrating the lives and dignity of the survivors: those women throughout all times who had been enslaved, abused, raped, mutilated, and yet they had somehow endured. If I looked foolish, out of shape, imbalanced, it didn't matter. I believed in the power of this pure intention.

Queen and I made a dramatic entrance from the top of the hill, beckoned by Ubaka's djembe and the voices of Aleah, Kumu, and Tory. The air became still, the audience in complete silence. Queen thrashed a horse-haired wand. I brandished a long silver blade. We were clearing the way, removing obscurations in true regal and warrior form. A strong wind rushed over us as we approached the stage, a sign of Spirit's recognition.

I calmly delivered Shadow Spirit's words that ended with:

I'm going to give her my mojo what holds the key to the Universe; so long she knows how to pilot the mothership. She say she going to dance her way back to herself—and I say that sounds good to me.

I felt her strength, sweet and vulnerable. I then turned away from the audience and untied my sarong, letting it drop to the floor. I pushed back nervous thoughts about what I looked like, my thick thighs and flabby stomach. I took a deep breath and turned around to the hundreds of faces, sacred witnesses, holding me. As soon as I opened my arms wide, to my amazement, I felt free and joyful beyond my wildest imagination. As a soft breeze blew across my face, I was one with my own breath. A force was spiraling within, gently moving me around to face each direction, like a mother presenting a newborn for the first time. I was an eagle gliding effortlessly, in spacious skies. I had never felt so light, yet so steady. I had never been so at ease in my body, so present. Facing each direction, gathering energy from the earth into my yoni, settling into the breath and exhaling, sending energy through my heart to the heavens. With every breath, I was at home in my body with the innocence of a child. Later I was told that two hawks circled above the amphitheater as I danced. I was filled with gratitude.

When our performance ceremony was complete, with a transformation fire pit still burning in front of the stage, several women approached me. Most had few words, but their eyes and tear-stained faces spoke volumes.

"Thank you for doing what you did."

"I don't have the words to express what that meant to me."

"Watching you, I feel like I am ready to take some risks, do something I've been too afraid to do."

Some just held me as their tears fell on to my shoulder. Their responses were an unexpected gift, but also a confirmation that when you take care of yourself, so many others are served, that we are all connected by a collective experience or by a cellular memory, in my case, of what women in our lineage have endured for centuries. In that magical moment, a spell had been broken. In my sisters' arms, I realized the dance had been a gift of love. Since then I have not seen or heard from my Shadow-Sister Spirit. Her work here was complete. Mine was just beginning.

THE LAST LINE

Tari Muñiz

3:00 a.m.: We wake up at three in order to be "out the door by four," the packing mantra for this year's Fest. The caravan begins and we move toward home. Blessed to live a few hours away from Hart, we arrive at 6:30 a.m. It is the earliest we've ever been here and longest line I have ever seen. It curves beyond the dirt road and lines the side of the highway. Sheriffs direct traffic. They are friendly. They are used to us. The whole town of Hart has been used to us for decades. Signs at the liquor stores say *Welcome, Womyn*.

7:00 a.m.: Fang and Annie in one car, I in another, take our place. We park in line. We have snacks, ice, weed, dinner for after we set up. We haven't done the line on this scale. We knew there would more of us than ever. For now, we nap.

11:25 a.m.: The line has more than doubled. We knew there would more of us than ever at the fortieth and final Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. The daughters of the Goddess would gather. We wait in jubilation and grief.

12:20 p.m.: We haven't moved, although a sheriff officer told us to prepare to move more than an hour ago. Fang takes our tarps and workshift choices and hikes toward the gate, five miles from where we are. The goal is for her to get her wristband, sign us up for workshifts, and take our tarps to the area we camp. It's a huge task, and Fang is our most noble and adorable butch. We assume we will see her before we get to the gate.

1:20 p.m.: We are still in the same spot. A raffle sister tells us the gates are open. I always make sure I have cash in small bills for the in-line commerce. Womyn wander up and down the road. Chairs, snacks, and merchandise are set up. It's the best tailgate party.