

## **Message on Climate Change from Worldwide Message Council**

As you know ecology is one of my foremost passions along with peace, so I'm interested in being part of this process. As a contribution to this process the Sydney dances wisdom council recently organised our annual Spring Renewal with Noel Butler an Aboriginal elder from south coast NSW.

Our Aboriginal dance weekend went beyond all my expectations. We now finally have an Aboriginal dance that the dance network has been gifted. It feels like a major breakthrough for the Australian dance community. I look forward to sharing it with you some time.

For me, personally this feels like a major milestone in my work as an Australian, a Sufi, a social ecologist and a peace activist. The deep wounding of the Aboriginal people of Australia is unfathomable even with my being a child of Holocaust survivors. In Australia, unlike New Zealand there has never been a treaty with the indigenous owners of the land. As you know the official policy was Terra Nullius and until 1967 they were not even counted in the census, but rather classified with fauna and flora. While anti-Semitism is a horror, at least Jews were regarded as humans, just inferior humans to perpetrators like the Nazis. Or as African Americans and Native Americans have also experienced extreme forms of racism and persecution, they were still considered to be human. While Australian Aboriginal people were not considered to be human according to the law of the land until the referendum of 1967, when to their credit 90% of Australians voted for this to be rectified.

Indeed I was on a panel last year of a book examining cultural complexes in Australia. It was the first comprehensive study of this Jungian inspired phenomenon. In the introduction the editors make it explicit that Australia was chosen for the first book on this topic because the cultural complexes here are amongst the most challenging on the planet. In mainstream, Australia there is still massive ignorance about the very existence of Aboriginal people and their culture.

For example a question I asked my students last week was what Native American Nations did they know, and several names were mentioned. Likewise people knew of Maoris because of their football teams and of different Pacific Islanders, but they had no idea of Australian Aboriginal culture or language. And I'm talking about students in a tertiary institution who will be future teachers.

As a result we focus on Aboriginal studies in all our social ecology units to compensate for this level of ignorance in the community. After all when it comes to education for sustainability, which is one of the units I'm teaching this semester, I present them as our teachers of how to live sustainably in Australia, which is the driest and most arid of continents on the planet. Yet, Aboriginal people were able to sustain their life here for up 70,000 years according to some sources, certainly 50,000 years is now well accepted.

In my own experience of Aboriginal culture it is very profound and has many parallels with Sufism and Buddhism. Indeed, Uncle Max, a wisdom elder from southern NSW, did a beautiful workshop with Susan Murphy, a local Zen Rishi, filmmaker, author and social ecologist, at the Buddhist library some years ago. This is something that I intuited myself from my Buddhist and Aboriginal studies. Also Pir Zia, when he was in Australia, said that Sufis always go to the indigenous cultures.

During the weekend we camped in the bush on the land of Noel Butler and in the morning, the bird choruses were unbelievable. Australia has a vast diversity of song birds that create a veritable symphony each morning, while at night the frogs in the small lake on the land sang us lullabies. The first time I ever really listened to the symphony of the birds was in my sesshins with Robert Aitken Rishi in the 80s. These were held at a Sacred Heart Convent in rural NSW, still surrounded by forest in those days and because of the nature of Zen sitting I learnt to really listen to them. It was one of the things I really loved about Zen practice. It really reconnected me to nature.

This is exactly what happened at our Aboriginal retreat with Noel, however it went even deeper, because there was also all the stories of the land that he told. As a traditional elder Noel knew all the stories and as an artist he'd produced many artworks inspired by nature and the Budawang stories of his people. However, he was also a landscape gardener and had worked with National Parks and so he also knew all the Latin names of the plants that he described.

His is a real two-way culture as is called by some Aboriginal groups. Because of racism in the past it has been very difficult for Aboriginal people to gain a western education in Australia, although this has changed in recent years. Sadly, most of the young people who are educated in western institutions however lose their connection to their traditional Aboriginal culture. This is

why some rare individuals like Noel have chosen to teach non-Aboriginal people his culture, to stop it dying out altogether.

So we had a day of cultural ecological teachings in the bush by Noel, followed by an evening performance of traditional dances by his nephews. It was out of this that our first fully Aboriginal dance came. Robyn boldly asked if we could learn the dances they shared. They very skilfully said no to those dances, as they belonged to the family, but then added however there are dances we can share and gift to your community, and this they did. The next day and a half we danced indigenous inspired dances all day and in the evening we sat around the fire telling stories of the ancestors, which was inspired by Shafia and Wendy's way of sharing the Maori dances with the mihi sessions of ancestral stories.

It was a truly magical weekend and so successful in the eyes of the community that everyone there, and there were 19 of us, wanted to repeat this for next year's Spring Renewal Retreat. Then last night, at our evening of dances in Bondi, Karen and I led an evening of indigenous inspired dances, including our newly gifted Aboriginal dance. Once again it was an evening of eat, dance and pray together in the spirit of Murshid Sam with a strong Earth and Heaven connection.

I now feel so much more connected to this land and its indigenous culture. We ended our weekend of dances with Ancestors Sky People, and with words of Shabda's version "we are truly blessed". I had a sense that everyone in the circle really felt that to be true in that moment!

Much love and light to you,  
and thank you so much for all your support,  
Arjuna