

A Conversation with Murshida Mariam Baker

Mariam Baker is a senior teacher of Sufi Ruhaniat International, a leader in the Dances of Universal Peace since 1974, and a senior teacher of the Mevlevi Order of America. She is also the executive director of the SoulWork Foundation, a passionate gardener and mother of five. Mariam is the author of two books, *Women as Divine; Tales of the Goddess* and *Sacred Voices; Stories from the Caravan of Women*.

This multifaceted and talented person will be our guest speaker for a DUPNA Zoom event scheduled for **January 19, 2020 at 5 pm Pacific Time**, near the 49th Urs of Murshid Samuel Lewis on January 15th.

On a recent wintry day in Michigan, I talked with Murshida Mariam who was at her home, near San Francisco, in sunny California.

Jane: Mariam, tell us how you see the Dances in our world today, and how you think the Dances will continue to be perpetuated?

Mariam: I see the Dances as an important tool; one of those miraculous tools, like mindfulness (which she indicates is much needed in the world today). These are great mystical tools, very simple, and in other ways, amazingly vast and intertwined with deep wisdom. The Dances of Universal Peace are a great gift we received from Murshid Sam and Ruth St. Denis...a reflector on the mirror of what was coming through the dream world.

The Dances are a tool for unity, and there is a beginning of seeing their spontaneous inclusiveness in other gatherings. When I travel, I see the Dances everywhere. Sometimes I find myself in circles where it is important not to overdo discussions on the where-from and what-for, but, in my experience, it is more productive simply to say, "Let's dance!" The Dances allow the connections to happen, bypassing thought. There are times when doors can be closed with too many words and really opened with the Dance.

I think of us like the mustard seed Yeshua and Murshid Sam refer to, or like wild grasses our Native People speak of in their teachings.

Jane: What is your viewpoint about engaging young people?

Mariam: So much is going on here in the U.S. Many huge and wonderful Bhakti festivals are happening, and many young people are immersed in Kirtan. Right now, that is on fire in our country. There are large vectors of attention being given to social justice. The Dances definitely speak to that, to being inclusive and embracing all traditions and all cultures.

There is a real yearning in our young people for more than just words; they want action, honesty, and waking up. The youth carry a desire for change, which is spectacular for all of us!

I am excited about the youth initiatives, such as the Beyond Initiative, that is taking the Dances around the world once again. (See <https://www.dancesofuniversalpeace.org/wwwbeyond.shtm>).

Jane: Do you think retreats specifically for young people are a good way to encourage the growth of the Dances in the U.S.?

Mariam: It varies from community to community. In Northern California there has been a youth retreat at our Mendocino summer camp for 20 years. Also Florida, and I believe, the Northwest states, have youth activities. Like some of us elders, who met the Dances in our 20s, they experience the same wonderful enthusiasm and joy at these large gatherings. Some communities raise funds for youth scholarships, which is a good way to support these retreats.

Jane: Mariam, Talk with us about the powerful rise of the Divine Feminine that is happening all around us these days.

Mariam: This longing for the Divine Feminine started very early with me. Even before I was a young Sufi, I sought the feminine face of God. I had the realization that if there was a God the Father, there had to be a God the Mother. I grew up in the Irish Catholic mystic tradition and Mary, the Saints and Magdalene were very important to me.

During my first initiation with Moineddin, the first questions I asked were regarding the prayers. I told him that I could not pray the traditional prayers; I had changed the prayers into gender-free language. His response was, "I don't care how you pray, I care that you pray." That was a clue to me that I'd landed in the right place, with a good connection to a friend and teacher.

Starting about 1974, through the Walks, I became so inspired. I asked, "What would the walk of Ma Kali be? What would that Dance be?" I also contemplated many other female deities in this way. I started a small theater company called the Crescent Heart Ensemble; Theater of Healing and Transformation, and from that grew the book, *Woman as Divine, Tales of the Goddess*, which was published in 1983.

Saadi Neil-Douglas Klotz and Kamae Amrapali Miller were very supportive of my work in those days, when sacred feminism was still not a very popular concept.

Now I emphasize unity, going beyond God the Father and God the Mother, and realizing there is more. Using SoulWork language, we can ask, how do we welcome all the rainbow parts of our nature? Beyond binary limitations...the Mother does not have a special tribe. The Mother accepts all beings; there is not a limitation.

The rise of the Divine Feminine is so exciting...in terms of balance. Each of us is beginning to go beyond the hypnotic influence of the last 5000 years, the patriarchal and hierarchical view, and thus to enter into a deeper healing of the human race to not only accept that external part of ourselves, but in an inner way, to integrate the feminine. She's been a real bad guy in our culture for a long time.

I believe that what is going on, because of that rise, that there is a real healing of our human family and that healing is also seen in our desire to save our Mother Planet. And the healing of Mother Earth cannot happen without it. We need all the different manifestations of love to get us through.

Jane: Do you see this rise of the Divine Feminine when you travel around the world?

Mariam: Yes and no, there still are places where women are seen as "less than." It is the cultural reality in some places, and that is the way it is, at this time. How do we make harmony with that? And, how do we crack or deconstruct that false/illusory idea of what a woman is? I think that it is possible even while respecting cultural differences.

In certain places, women are discouraged from dancing. I pray that the situation is shifting. It is gradually happening because of the magnetism of the Dance, and the incredible mystic tradition that we carry. It is an

exciting, fruitful moment, asking these questions. How do we celebrate life and respect one another? Again, going back to SoulWork, we recognize that we are one family. Every part is of value. Every part is of noble birth. These days, I often add the Goddess Invocation at our Dance gatherings along with the invocation of Hazrat Inayat Khan. Here is a small piece of it:

*Everything lost is found again, in a new form, in a new way.
Everything hurt is healed again, in a new time, in a new day.
Change us, touch us. Touch us, change us.*

Jane: Mariam, the next topic I would like to ask you about brings us to our own work with the Dances of Universal Peace...as dancers, as leaders or as people helping to make the Dances grow and thrive in administrative or organizational ways. How would you advise people to work together? Why is it that, in spite of our best intentions, the ego (in Sufi terms, the nafs) continues to be such a challenge at times when we are working together for peace?

Mariam: Aren't we lucky? In many ways, I see it as a natural part, growing pains, as human beings, as family. It can be incredibly excruciating, painful, hurtful and bizarre to experience conflicts on this journey together. I am immersed in the SoulWork tradition and use that as a tool. "What is really going on here? What is being generated here? How can we peel away the layers of the nafs?" It's a miracle when it happens! It is our ultimate responsibility.

There are times when it's just, "Towards the One," and you just keep going, remembering that the ego stuff is just not true. We have a good example of the real and true in Murshid Sam.

And it's important, too, to free our voices in loving ways, practical ways, without hurting. Aren't we lucky we get to play it out like this?

The more we can work with what divides, the more we can become diplomats of peace. It is our blessed purpose, in this world, at this time, when there is a polarization in North America and all over the world for each of us who dance, and who are leaders of the Dances, to become diplomats for peace. And of course, sometimes we just can't find the peace. It is a miracle to discover solutions.

Jane: Specifically, do you have advice for problems within Dance circles?

Mariam: I think any concerns should, first, always be addressed privately, not in the dance meeting. It can be helpful to contact the dance leader's mentor (or mentors) for help if a serious situation arises. Dance leaders can get confused ideas about power—"everybody is looking at me." If that happens, then the person needs to polish it up and to become more powerful. It goes back to an Ibn Arabi quote, "Sufism is about experience." We don't want to put people to sleep with too much teaching. I like to keep my introductions to a Dance to about the length of the Invocation. Explanations are okay if you can do it like a magician and draw people deeper into the Dance and wakefulness.

The threshold we are looking at crossing is beyond the hierarchical and patriarchal, and into our capacity to work together.

Jane: Speaking of leadership, Murshid Moineddin was pir of the Ruhaniat for 30 years. There were so many difficulties to face during those formative years. He must have been an amazing person!

Mariam: Totally, and very down to earth. A beautiful being, physically and in his humanness. He never tried to be anything he wasn't. He had a big assignment and did a good job through his life and death experiences. For us as dance leaders, I believe his strongest message was about deepening the Dances. And to do that, work is needed on the nafs, on ourselves, relative to power and relative to recognition.

Moineddin wasn't always popular with his colleagues and yet he was so committed to truth, to high ethical and moral standards. And he loved dancing himself. Towards the end of his life, one of his favorite dances was *Wearing my Long Tail Feathers As I Fly*. He very much had the spirit of Murshid Sam, in his own unique way, of carrying on that transmission.

In the early days, both Moineddin and Pir Vilayat were my guides, and they sent me and my first husband off to the Northwestern U.S. to spread the message and bring the Dances of Universal Peace.

Jane: In conclusion, Mariam, how has the experiences you have had with the Dances of Universal Peace affected your life?

Mariam: In the great circle of time and space, there are so many ways to see what an immense treasure the Dances have been, how I have been

gifted with so many tools that I use every single day of my life. In the beginning I tuned into the elemental practices and the elemental Dances and Walks. I used these all through my child-rearing years, with five children. Also, I learned so much from my relationship with Murshida Vera Corda. These studies all aided me in my development as a spiritual breath coach and midwife, and in my focus on the Mevlevi Whirling Dervish Community.

In the reality of my life, the Dances make me really happy and give me a great balance in terms of how to walk Towards the One.