

# Annual National Folk Organization Conference

## April 26<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>, 2018

### Tenafly, New Jersey

I have called my talk today “*Of the People, By the People, For the People,*” the closing words of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, delivered on November 19, 1863. I hope the reasons will become obvious as my thoughts emerge.

I am not concerned with dance as performance but with dance when it is an integral part of a culture, usually as a significant part of an event or series of events which, in turn, is a part of a larger whole – a microcosm of the macrocosm – and potentially a very impactful one, this macrocosm being the culture itself.

I think that, even as we start this conference, we need to be realistic and realize that today the questions related both to the concept of “a global community” and to “celebrating our differences” are much debated. Each of these concepts is loaded with issues.

The attitudes toward difference range from nationalism, multiculturalism, and globalism to racism and separatism. Will a global community become a “melting pot” or will groups be able to maintain their cultural integrity while inter-relating socially and conceptually?

Twenty-six years ago, in a 1992 Time magazine cover story, Robert Hughes offered these thoughts: “America is a place filled with diversity, unsettled histories, images impinging on one another and spawning unexpected shapes. Its polyphony of voices, its constant eddying of claims to identity, is one of the things that make America America.” (1992:47)

He continues “America is a collective act of the imagination whose making never ends, and once that sense of collectivity and mutual respect is broken, the possibilities of American-ness begin to unravel.” (1992:44-45) These are thoughts which suggest that America has been the first experiment in global community. And there always is the question of whether we are, or will be, succeeding or failing?

We are truly confronting the complexity of cultures, even as we attempt to move towards global consciousness. We are confronted with the dichotomy between culturalism, with its enriched identity of shared worldviews, and racism, where sense of self-identity expresses itself in fear and anger toward others. Almost every area of the world is in turmoil because of the confrontation of these two points of view.

And how does folk dance fit itself into this? Folk Dance used to be a very personal statement of the dance evolved in an area or community or culture, and usually danced to celebrate togetherness in both special and more general situations. Folk dance gave one a wonderful sense of shared identity and mutual empowerment, empowerment and meaning, not *against* something, but *for* something: who you were as a group, as a people. Now it is usually solely a dance form,

not now actively connected to a particular event, area or culture, but something that can be shared with many, a source of general pleasure.

When Roo Lester called to invite me to give this keynote address she reminded me that Elsie Dunin had given the keynote address in 2016, in Santa Clara, California. I felt very humbled and quite overwhelmed. There is no one who understands folk dance, both physically and conceptually, better than Elsie.

I am excited to tell you that, very recently, April 10-12 of this year, the Institute for Folklore “Marko Cepenkov” held a jubilee symposium in Skopje, Macedonia, celebrating the 50-years of significant research in Macedonia pursued by Elsie Ivancich Dunin. The theme of the symposium is: Traditional culture of the Roma in Macedonia and the Balkans.” It featured an exhibition of photographs and films taken by Elsie Dunin during 50 years of marvelous observation of the Gjurgjovden/Erdelezi celebration of the Romani community in Skopje. UNESCO has proclaimed the Erdelezi events, as they currently occur both in Macedonia and Turkey, to be preserved as Intangible Cultural Heritage, making the museum exhibit in Skopje to be internationally significant. Our heartfelt congratulations go to Elsie.

This is so interesting because dance was a part of Elsie’s life from the beginning, as is true of most people born or brought up within European cultures. I, on the other hand, come from families on both my mother’s side and my father’s side, who arrived on the continent of North America in the early 1600s before it was the United States of America. They didn’t bring dance with them. In the many years that Elsie and I worked together at UCLA, it was always understood that Elsie would present the actual experience of dance, as practiced by the people, and I would ask the questions of why.

This is what happened in the Dance Ethnology program which into being based on just this premise. It was envisioned as a small but recognized portion of the graduate program with the founding of the Department of Dance in the College of Fine Arts at University of California, Los Angeles, in 1962, the first in a state university in the United States, and perhaps inspired by the already existing Ethnomusicology program in the Department of Music at UCLA. First it was just an idea on a piece of paper, until Elsie and I joined the faculty in 1967. Our involvement with the department was nurtured by the understanding that we would develop the idea into a fully-articulated graduate program in this area.

By 1970 it had become a clearly structured sequence of classes. By 1980, these classes included six quarters devoted to theory and methodology as well as courses in area studies and year-long sequences of performance practices. UCLA was not only a pioneer in the founding of a department concerned with both the theory and practice of dance throughout the world, but it had pioneered the formal introduction of the field of Dance Ethnology into US education.

I retired in 1991 and Elsie three years later, and nobody had emerged to take over its leadership. What continues to be exciting, however, is that many who came through the program have continued their commitment to world dance in one way or another. Roo Lester is one example of this. For many, their evolving life histories became their continuing field experiences, which they

framed or understood and practiced, from the point of view of the always active theories and practices that they had learned and explored in the program.

A dance ethnologist is one who is concerned with studying and questioning all the elements of the how and why of dance in and throughout a society, and in cultures as a whole. My work calls for a comprehensive perspective, which seeks out the patterns of human behavior called dance, and asks what are their functions both to a specific culture and in and to world societies as a whole.

This field of investigation has been the major focus of my work and my life for the last seventy-plus years. Before that, almost since the beginning of my own life ninety years ago, dance has been a central part of my life. It has involved me in many ways, which included as a dancer, choreographer, dance filmmaker and, most importantly from my point of view, the constant asker of the questions of how and why, which ultimately has led me to so much more.

Understanding is an experiential word, particularly used in this context, with its sense of the necessity of actually standing physically under an idea and experientially supporting the concept. Over the years I have discovered dance to be what I have called “kinesthetic-conceptualization.” I find this “body sensed,” “kinesthetic knowledge,” essential to the process of knowing dance as a whole. It is a process acknowledged by many peoples, in many cultures.

A quote from a book The Sacred, published by Navajo Community College, states: “Learning the way for Native Americans meant going directly to the source. The People voyaged with their *entire bodies, and with all their senses*, including language and thought, in order to find the answers to questions and to aid in their understanding of themselves and their world.” (emphasis added)

This is essentially what dance is all about, so let me repeat that quote again: “The People voyaged *with their entire bodies, and with all their senses*, including language and thought, in order to find the answers to questions, and to aid in their understanding of themselves and their world.” In my terms that is “kinesthetic-conceptualization,” the Navajo way of saying it is longer but, I think, much more palatable.

How did I begin to understand myself in this world? Early on, like most children, there was something about dancing that excited me. There is a very early bit of film shot when I was probably about 1½ and dancing – that is, I was bobbing up and down to some imagined rhythm – and somebody tried to stop me. I just insist on “dancing.”

I went to an extraordinary school in New York called Dalton School, which was evolved, in part, on the principles of John Dewey’s “Learning by Doing” – experiencing. Through Dalton, I came to know dance as “a way of knowing” and “of communicating that knowledge,” that was as indispensable as any other. I shared and communicated much of what I was learning to others in that way and Dalton found that acceptable.

There were other parts of my evolution: The School of American Ballet opened in New York City, in 1934. I started there two years later. Ballet was my first structured dance experience.

Many, many others followed, some quite rapidly and unexpectedly. I had a good friend at Dalton named Lydia Steinway. During the summer of 1938, she asked me to visit her at Longpond, in Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts. It was lovely, more a lake than a pond. While we were swimming, we heard music coming across the water and decided to row over and investigate. We discovered it was a folk dance camp called Pinewoods. It had an interesting history, having been started by Helen Storrow, who created this English Folk Dance camp after meeting Cecil Sharp and being smitten by English Dance forms of all kinds. When we arrived, they invited us to join in – so exciting! And so I had another taste of what dance could be.

By 1945 I had completed my high school education in Washington, DC, and had been accepted into college, but I told my parents I wanted to focus on dance. I became a regular, year-round student at the School of American Ballet. It was an interesting time. Classes, at that point, included Modern Dance. I believe Martha Graham herself had been asked to teach but Dorothy Bird, one of her gifted company members, came instead.

There was also “character” dance taught by George Balanchine. Character Dance was folk dance, except it was limited to European forms which, when slightly altered, could be integrated into a structured ballet choreography – the polonaise, mazurka, etc. The polonaise was, for me, a particularly joyous and energetic dance. I loved the rhythm. I loved the “pizzazz.”

One day, after we had learned it, we were to take partners, and George Balanchine came over and asked if *he* could dance with *me*. That was certainly a moment to be treasured. For a few minutes, I imagined that I touched the essence of dance. However, what was equally exciting about that event was the full experiential realization that there were other important and exciting forms of dance, in addition to ballet and these were, perhaps, more full of freedom and life.

I was part of the historic first performances of Ballet Society, the company which later was renamed the New York City Ballet. In 1946, I danced in “The Spellbound Child,” choreographed by Balanchine. I was in the corps, but I was dancing. In April, 1947, I was again a part of a second performance of Ballet Society. That time I was dancing in “Highland Fling,” choreographed by Todd Bolender.

By the fall of 1947, I found myself needing to set off in yet another direction, in my ever-growing quest to experience dance in its many dimensions. My next stop was Bennington College, for a Degree in Dance. Bennington was the first college to offer such a degree. There, the quality and breadth of my interest in dance, were marvelously enriched. I’m not sure which came first, my interest in film or my interest in world dance, but hands-on involvement in both happened in relatively close order while at Bennington.

My background up until then had been performance, and the observation of important and exciting choreography, since I myself was choreographing, which was a very, very enriching experience. For my first piece of choreography, I chose to work with Georgia Sea Island children’s songs and games which I discovered through listening to selections from the wonderful Alan Lomax Collection at the Library of Congress. The sounds and rhythms really excited me, but these were solely recordings of the sounds. When I tried to get information on the movements, I was shocked at the lack. I realized a critical element of dance research was

missing: the ability to see and analyze the movement in an accessible form, in an equivalent to the written word. I realized that “motion” pictures, i.e., films, could, should, and perhaps *must* be a part of this whole process. Yes, this was another new direction for me to explore, and led to a year of apprenticeship, participating in every aspect of filmmaking, from shooting to editing, before my graduation, at the International Film Foundation in New York City, arranged by Bennington.

Simultaneously, at Bennington I was introduced through my professor, Edward T. Hall, to the importance of dance conceptually, as a pivotal element of culture. His work was just becoming well known through his many books, such as the “Hidden Dimension,” “Silent Language,” and later, “The Dance of Life.” They started with his study of Proxemics (the study of people’s use of space as a cultural artifact, and as an organizing and communication system). This, of course, I recognized, was clearly related to, and perhaps fundamental, to dance.

I came to understand, through another of my professors, how dance was related to and perhaps fundamental to, ritual and myth, evolving culturally throughout time. All of these ideas I took with me to UCLA and was able to, in part, still further enrich them, through traveling on an almost year-long Western European Regional Research Fulbright during which I studied and directly experienced dance in European Folk Festivals.

What is singly important, pertinent, and exciting about this National Folk Organization Conference, as it brings us together here today, is its relationship to events going on in the United States and other parts of the world. I refer particularly to the Women’s Marches first occurring in 2017 and again in January of 2018. According to The Cut website, “People all across the country and the world flooded the streets yesterday for the second annual Women’s March.” This march coordinated mass rallies, attracting millions of participants, in hundreds of cities, towns and suburbs in the United States. The march was accompanied by sister rallies in Canada, the UK, Japan, Italy and several other countries. Some of the largest rallies in the United States were held in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, Dallas, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Atlanta.

By January 2018, the movement had become “a galvanizing force.” The Women’s March Global, under the theme of “Look Back, March Forward” included at least 38 rallies in Canada, with some in major cities such as Toronto and Calgary, attracting thousands. More events were planned by the Women’s March and, again very recently, the Students’ Marches were more than a movement. Hundreds of thousands have joined the movement, channeling their passion into action, planning hundreds of events to gather the community around issues that affects many, many Americans.

Much, much less well known, about a year ago in April, a million people worldwide marched in support of science, an event that organizers called the “largest event for science advocacy in history.” Students, teachers, scientists, supporters and advocates gathered across the globe.

The conversion from marching to dancing is subtle but extremely important if not a critical one. When a body wants to march, it can easily and often very joyfully be converted to dancing by the introduction of a rhythm and a beat. The acknowledgement and the mastery of the body is a key

element of empowerment, the transformation from commitment alone, to commitment and joy and something more.

I am not primarily concerned with cause, but rather with the process. It is a process that has probably been a part of our very early experience, as our movements turned from a walk to a skip, to a turn, two turns and suddenly you were dancing. Neither you nor others necessarily called it dance. It just was. Maybe later you were able to put that label on it. Or maybe it took years, and it happened because others choose to put that label to your actions, but so often you discovered that you liked it.

The subtle and very challenging question for us here today is “What is the difference between marching and dancing?” If the body wants to march, it can then be joyfully persuaded to dance. The transformation from marching to dancing is very subtle one perhaps most dependent on the emergence of rhythm. Once your body is “in the swing of things,” a very different relation happens.

If, in the evolution of this country, our first contacts with the Native Americans had been one of learning *from* them and understanding who they were, and how they shaped their lives, our history and the central and critical role of dance in that history, would have been very different. If our country’s evolution had evolved in such a way that, rather than telling *them* they couldn’t dance, we began to understand that we must dance. I repeat again what I consider a very important statement, initially voiced by the Navajos, who revealed that “The People (the Navajos) voyaged with their entire bodies, and with all their senses, including language and thought, in order to find the answers to questions and to aid in their understanding of themselves and their world.”

For a number of years at UCLA, we enjoyed the nourishment of taking our students in the Dance Ethnology Program to share in the Yaqui Indian Easter Ceremonies in Tucson, Arizona, at the Yaquis invitation. While we were their guests and solely observers, nevertheless we were able to sense deeply how the Yaquis “voyaged with their entire bodies, and with all their senses, in order to find the answers to questions and to aid in their understanding of themselves and their world”. Over the years, many of these same students have acknowledged that this experience was a key one, perhaps a turning point, as they passed through the program.

Through all these things, and many, many more, we understood better and better that in thought, and more importantly in action, we must be “of the people, by the people, for the people.”

It is interesting and significant that, very recently, on March 15, 2018, the New York Times carried an article stating that the biggest event of the year for local students in the West Coast area is the Danzantes del Valle, the participation in the dance tradition steeped in the regional cultures of Mexico.

I continue the quote “Danzantes del Valle, organized by a coalition of school dance directors and ArteAmericas, a nonprofit Latino arts center, is an annual event. The dedicated young dancers, confronted by immigration raids and anti-Mexican rhetoric, find a community of kindred spirits in folklórico. ‘There are many people who are hating our culture right now,’” says Jenny Cruz, a

senior at Central High School in Fresno, said. ‘Dancing makes you feel empowered over the hate.’” I believe that is a very important statement, so let me repeat it: “Dancing makes you feel empowered over the hate.”

The program in Porterville is emblematic of folklórico’s new burst of energy. The president of the nonprofit Danzantes Unidos, a transnational network of dancers, said it is “a declaration that the students are part of the fabric that makes America America.” José Tena, a revered dancer and teacher in Las Cruces, New Mexico, put it this way: “The purpose is not to create professional dancers, but to create members of the community who value who they are.”

To continue a quote from this article: “The appeal of folklórico cuts across cultures. Dancers at Fresno’s Central High, for example, have included Hmong, Russian and Punjabi students. But, for students with Mexican roots, it resonates most deeply. The Central High troupe, for example, is named after the Aztec God of rain because dance is the water that nourishes the culture.”

In bringing these thoughts to a close, I want to tell you something about a former student who understands exactly what I am getting at. She knows I am hoping to excite you all into action that goes beyond just your great love and enjoyment of folk dance but, in fact, leads to an understanding of its very empowering essence. Her name is Janet Reineck. She is the founder and Executive Director of World Dance for Humanity, a non-profit organization operating out of Santa Barbara, California, which, through dance classes and dance events, has help people in need by supporting small, sustainable, grassroots projects locally and in the developing world, particularly in Rwanda as it begins to survive its terrible genocide.

Janet’s life has been exciting. After earning a Bachelor’s degree in Ethnic Arts, and a Master’s degree in Dance Ethnology, both from UCLA, and a PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, Janet went to live in Kosovo (formerly in Yugoslavia) in 1981, as an anthropologist.

People told her not to go because she was a woman and “she’d be eaten alive.” “I traveled in the Balkans and encountered Albanians and I was drawn to them,” she recalls. She lived in a Muslim society where women couldn’t be alone and in a country that was also under Martial Law. But “I was in love with the place,” she says. “It’s inexplicable.”

In the 1990s, Oxfam asked her to return to Kosovo as the director of rural development projects. She was assigned to the county of Viti where the population was comprised of a mix of Serbians and Albanians. It was a brave and courageous thing she did, as the country was then in the middle of a Serbian crackdown. “We were able to build wells and fix schools and get girls to go to school, despite the Serbian crackdown,” she shared.

In 1997, war was on the horizon in Kosovo, and she was forced to leave her adoptive home and return to the United States, making a home in Santa Barbara, California. One day she came up with the idea for World Dance for Humanity. Janet teaches five classes a week, and all class proceeds go toward action. Throughout the years, World Dance for Humanity has funded grassroots projects in Nepal, Guatemala, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, and Uganda. Since 2013, they’ve been focused on Rwanda, where they’re helping over 9,000 people lift themselves out of

poverty in 25 rural cooperatives. Most of these communities are led by women who survived the genocide and formed agricultural cooperatives in an effort to stay alive.

World Dance for Humanity has provided these communities with:

- 1,077 goats, 52 full-grown pregnant cows, and 6 parcels of land
- Training in agriculture, business, and leadership
- Annual sponsorships for 200 high school and college students
- Seed money and training for 18 businesses, including sewing businesses, bakeries, a water project, a café, a brick business, fish farming project, and nursery school
- Health insurance for 800 people each year who cannot afford the \$4 annual fee
- 252 mattresses for people sleeping on the ground
- 230 solar lights for people with no electricity

Janet and her World Dancers also help locally in Santa Barbara, where they:

- Reach out to wheelchair-bound seniors and disabled adults through music and movement
- Provide a steady stream of volunteers for at-risk children
- Partner local high school students with Rwandan students through a Sister School program
- Mount a “Thriller” event each year as part of a world-wide dance phenomenon
- Bring their spirit and energy to community events that support justice and inclusion, like the Martin Luther King, Jr. Remembrance Day, Women’s March, and One Billion Rising, which protests violence against women with “Break the Chain,” a powerful dance choreographed by Debbie Allen

Janet uses dance as the bridge between cultures. She explains: “Dance can be a powerful bond between people – here at home and around the world. In Rwanda in the aftermath of the genocide, it becomes the ultimate equalizing force. Dancing together with passion, joy, and abandon, the differences between us disappear. We become a community of women sharing a euphoric experience and bearing witness to each other’s lives.”

I have such great excitement and admiration for Janet and the World Dance for Humanity’s work. I am sharing this with all of you here today because I feel that it is in the domain and preview of all of you working, sharing, enjoying and growing from your membership in the National Folk Organization to discover and allow yourselves to grow in similar directions. It is at the heart of what folk dance is all about. Folk dance creates a physical/mental bonding together; a physical/mental doingness, that make these kinds of projects both realistic and meaningful.

They are: Of the People, By the People, For the People

If you will forgive me I would like to close with some beautiful thoughts written by Janet Reineck. Janet writes:



“My mentor Allegra Snyder is inspired by the marches going on in our country, by what WD4H is doing, and the convergence of dance and activism. Last night I started writing and somehow it turned into this poem.”

Dance gives us the space and the spirit  
To find the part of ourselves  
Where boundaries soften and disappear  
Where we are in tune with each other...and with the world

Dancing together  
To intoxicating rhythms and melodies  
From Senegal to Spain, India to Ireland, Tunisia to Uzbekistan  
We samba, we salsa, we shimmy and swing  
We jitterbug and rock n’ roll  
We feel awake, alive  
*Embraced and embracing*  
*Ready for ACTION!*

Taking to the streets or public squares  
We transcend ourselves and our separateness  
Stretching beyond selfhood with a shout-out of solidarity and soul  
Saying with our bodies and bright smiles to everyone around us:  
*You are not alone! Dance, rise!*  
*Speak as one voice so you will be heard!*

Reaching our arms around the planet  
To Africa, to a thousand hazy Rwandan hillsides  
Still smoldering from decades of distrust and desperation  
We witness, we embrace, we bring our hearts and our help  
*We rise together, we jump, we sing out.*  
*We dance our togetherness!*

Thank you, Janet, and thank you to Roo Lester for inviting me, and thanks to each and every one of you who are here today.