

## Healing through dance

Anna King talks to traditional healer John Lockley  
about the healing power of dance

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For thousands of years before the evolution of orthodox medicine people in Europe used dance as part of ancient healing ceremonies. These practices remain very much alive in other parts of the world and John Lockley, from South Africa, is now in Ireland sharing traditional South African Healing Dance.

### **Are traditional healing systems relevant in today's modern society?**

About 500 BC Greek philosophers began to challenge traditional views about the laws of nature, life and death. They sought a reasonable explanation for human existence and completely denied the 'reality' of the gods and giants that up until then had permeated much of Greek mythological interpretations of the world. Alongside this new more 'reasonable' and 'materialistic' understanding of the universe emerged the Greek medical science that developed into what we now understand as modern medicine. The father of this science was Hippocrates, who was born in the island of Cos around 460 BC. Hippocrates taught that there are only natural explanations for sickness and health, and from this premise evolved a new understanding of healing with a focus on the objective, rational and physical. As modern medicine developed throughout Europe the role of spirituality, tradition, myth and the unseen was viewed as completely separate and irrelevant to human health and longevity. This was not, however the case in other parts of the world. In Asia, Africa and South America many cultures continued to respect the role of spirituality and traditional healing rites, and traditional practices are still used today by thousands of people all over the world. The role of symbolism and myth has remained an integral part of these teachings.

The accomplishments of modern orthodox medicine are without doubt immense. There is, however, once again a growing interest in some of the more traditional practices of healing. This is partly because in some areas of health and well being the proponents of modern medicine are, ironically mystified. People are, therefore, beginning to combine different forms of healing with orthodox medical treatment.

People in Ireland are familiar with alternative, complementary and 'New Age' forms of healing practices. There is, however, a profound difference between 'New Age' forms of healing and traditional indigenous healing practices. One predominant feature of traditional healing is how it is taught. The teachings are ancient and have been passed down through unbroken lineage. This historical connection is what keeps the teaching pure and strong. It is rare for someone outside the family, or community to be invited to train as a healer. If this does occur, however, it is accepted that it is because the ancestors have guided this person and they will be accepted within the community. Many traditional healers are trained from a very young age in all different aspects of healing. These practices have been used all over the world and in some cases very successfully, for centuries. Unfortunately, in Western civilisations a limited understanding of these practices has led to suspicion, judgement and subsequently many misconceptions and fears have been perpetuated.

I spoke with John Lockley, who has trained as a traditional healer in South Africa. John's mother was originally from Ireland. She went to Africa when she was a young woman and married a man from Zimbabwe. John grew up in South Africa and trained as a Clinical Psychologist. In 1996 John found himself working in a township in the Eastern Cape on an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign. It was during this time that he had the good fortune to meet a traditional healer from the Xhosa family. He was invited to attend a ceremony of the indigenous Bushman tradition and so began his training in ancient South African healing ceremony.

### **What kind of training did you undertake?**

"Traditional African Healers in South Africa are trained in three areas. First they are taught about herbs and herbal medicine. This involves procuring the herbs, and using them for washing, drinking and burning. The second part of the training is in psychic reading or *vumis*, which means to search with your mind. During these readings it is possible to establish what physical, emotional or spiritual problem is making a client sick or distressed. The third aspect of the training is dancing. We call this dancing *xentsa*. Anybody can dance *xentsa*; it is suitable for the young, old, sick or physically injured. The dance is based on the human heartbeat. Focussing on the heartbeat is incredibly centring and can stimulate inner peace, reduce anxiety, and bring about a sense of awareness and meaning. The steps are very simple and grounding. This particular dance is a way of moving into a deep meditative state, which enables the dancer to connect with his or her ancestors through 'dream' - otherwise known as the 'river world'. During the dance a vision or message will be given, which is then shared with the people in the room or community. Training to become a traditional healer can take many years. As a person goes through the various stages of becoming a healer their energy becomes stronger. This is reflected in the way that healers wear beads. A young trainee only wears a few beads, but a fully accomplished healer wears many beads to ground their energy."

### **What did you personally learn from the training?**

"It took a while for us to work together at overcoming the immense socio/political challenges facing South Africa at that time and it was hard for me to learn a complicated African language. Together we broke down the boundaries of racism and I discovered the richness and beauty of a culture that is so different from my own. Spending time with these families was an incredibly humbling experience. These families live in simplicity – by our Western standards they live in poverty. But when I am sitting with these families, drinking black tea and breaking bread, I am aware of the richness of spirit and life that we in the West (Western culture) no longer have. We may have gold and fast cars but many people no longer know who they are or where they come from. The Xhosa family has helped me once again find my spirit. They have given me hope and have supported me on my own healing journey. I am now living in Ireland, so that I may share what I have learned with Irish people. I am both Irish and African. I believe that my work here will help people to understand a side of Africa that is not seen on the news or read about in the newspapers."

Over the next five weeks John will be running South African Healing Dance (*xentsa*) workshops and conducting psychic readings (*vumisa*). John runs Galway City Yoga and can be contacted on 0879-398172. The workshops begin on Saturday 15 January.