

Fires of Change™

Can ancient rituals of empowerment, used by indigenous cultures for centuries, have applications in today's corporate world?

Four large fires burn, waiting to be raked into glowing paths. To some of the three hundred people standing in the circle these paths represent insurmountable obstacles, to others an exhilarating challenge. Still others see those glowing coals as a way to break through fears in order to motivate themselves to go for distant goals or challenges. A small number perceive those gleaming pathways as leading them toward a reality which speaks of transformation and change. For them it is a trail which, if followed, will lead them on an amazing dance of ever deepening awareness. This last group interests me most. It is primarily for them that I have lit those fires, for I believe it is they who are beginning to grasp the true nature of this ancient dance of fire.

People from varied cultures have firewalked since before recorded history. Although each culture has been unique in its customs involving the practice of firewalking, the firewalk has always been used in the context of emotional, physical or spiritual healing. Tibetan monks walked to droning chanting, crossing the glowing coal bed one hundred eight times to deepen their capacity to concentrate and focus. The Kahunas, the mystics of the Hawaiian Islands, walked on glowing lava to affirm their atonement with Pele, the goddess of earth and fire. On the Fijian Islands, young girls walked while being initiated into womanhood. Under the brilliant African night sky the Kalahari !Kung, renown for their capacities as healers before the white settlers disrupted their culture, danced through the fires to gather the power needed to heal the sick and wounded. On the North American continent the Cherokee and Zuni Indians walked, and some say still walk, in highly secret ceremonies.

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Throughout history fire has fascinated, warmed, comforted and terrified us. Looking around the fire, I see those sentiments reflected on the faces of these contemporary corporate warriors standing in a circle around me.

I've been invited to lead this firewalk as part of a company retreat near Salt Lake City. We are in a small valley. A stream, which the early summer runoff has turned into a roaring torrent, runs through it. A drummer holds a steady beat. The firelight dances on the faces of the people in the circle, people gathering, as they have done for thousands of years, around fires. High mountains circle our group speaking of beauty and permanence. Their snowy caps reflect the silver light of the half moon just coming over the horizon. To the west, appearing as massive as the mountains, lies the hotel with hundreds of hotel rooms, conference and ball rooms, restaurants and, up on the tenth floor, the snack bar, gym, swimming pool and Jacuzzi. It seems almost out of context seen behind the fires, with the drum echoing ancient earth rhythms. Or is it I who am out of context bringing the myth of fire, its ritual and power to the corporate setting? Can the corporate culture, so alienated from the basic elements, regain the capacity to grasp the true potential available to us? And more importantly, will these businessmen and women be able to keep that fire alive in the corporate setting, allowing the workplace to become an arena for inner nourishment and a path of self-discovery?

This retreat is being held due to the extreme pressures that change in the industry is inflicting on the individuals in this company. Their market is growing rapidly and, for the first time in their history, they are facing intense competition. The company is experiencing great turnover in their employees due to the increased pressures and they are finding that the corporate structures they used in the past are no longer working. They need their people to look within themselves for resources, to think independently and creatively and to be able to generate the enthusiasm and energy needed to deal with seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

I was invited to work with the managers in this company a few months earlier by Rob Rabbin, an organization clarity coach and founder of the Hamsa Institute. This was the first time he had

experienced the firewalk. He called the event with the 45 managers an "unqualified success." He went on to say: "The firewalk is a dynamic experience in which people can learn, practice and apply the principles of empowerment." The exhilaration that people feel when they actually walk through their fears and perceived limitations easily translates into stronger and more open relationships, more effective communication, and a heightened sense of team spirit and cooperation." Because of the quantitative changes that happened in that group and therefore in the entire company, they created a setting for me to work with the rest of their employees. For the past fourteen years I have worked with thousands of people with the firewalk. In these walks, again and again I have witnessed the remarkably powerful effect the firewalk has on groups and individuals.

Since 1984, I have trained firewalk instructors and studied the results of their walks. I have read volumes of research by skeptics, scientists and anthropologists who struggled to answer the question "Why is firewalking possible?" It is amusing and touching to me that for the most plausible explanation, one which satisfies both my intellect and my heart and is verified through my experience, I must turn back to the cradle of civilization, to an African tribe which fascinates anthropologists with their almost Stone Age culture.

In the Kalahari desert of Southern Africa, the !Kung bushmen have walked on fire since their tribal beginnings. Their fire dance is a high-energy community healing that empowers both individuals and the tribe as a whole. In 1977, anthropologist Laurens van der Post published his observations about the !Kung:

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"How the dancers found the power to go on ever faster and faster, hour after hour, seemed beyond explanation or belief. Long before the end, they seemed to pass into a dimension of reality far out of reach of my understanding, and to a moment and a place which belonged only technically to the desert in which we were all gathered. Indeed, so obsessed did the men become with this search for fire that they were drawn nearer and nearer to the flames... Then, suddenly, they halved the circle and went dancing with their bare feet through the middle of the flames."

Harvard Psychologist Richard Katz went to the Kalahari in 1982 and reports that "as the dance intensifies, n/um, or energy, is activated in those who are healers, most of whom are among the dancing men. As n/um intensifies in the healers, they experience an enhanced consciousness called !Kia, during which they heal all those at the dance." Katz goes on to state:

"...the !Kung work with the fire to help heat up the dancers' n/um. Dancers will go in the fire, walk in it, put their head in it, pick up coals and rub them over their hands and body... When the n/um in their body is boiling and as hot as the fire, they will not be burned."

N/um, chi, prana, ki, life force. When our n/um equals the n/um of the fire we walk on it unharmed. When our life force equals the challenge at hand, be it a fire, an illness or a corporation facing a changing world, we are successful in our venture. The question is: How do we learn to tap into or generate that n/um or life force, and how do we keep it alive in the corporate setting? Perhaps the ancient dance of fire holds a hint for us.

In Peruvian mythology the path toward personal mastery is symbolized by three animals. The first is a snake, representing the shedding of our past conditioning. The second animal is the puma depicting physical excellence, and the third is the condor, who soars on great wings to spiritual heights. I believe firewalking is the highest form of puma practice available to us. It teaches us to generate the energy needed to achieve success and to focus that energy with a clear mind.

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I am not surprised that companies are beginning to see the value in using the firewalk to empower their employees. The firewalk allows people to experience a source of energy which helps them to reach beyond their limiting beliefs. Breaking through our perceived boundaries frees an incredible

amount of creative energy, allowing people to redefine themselves as people to whom the impossible becomes achievable. As we know, it is our inner image of ourselves which either hinders or furthers our aspirations. As company structures change, the inner structure of its employees will have to change to reflect a new model of creativity and self reliance. And the reverse is true also: as people discover the beauty and creativity of their inner nature, companies will have to change to allow for the expression of that nature.

Tonight had not been about firewalking. It had been about facing our fears squarely and giving up our patterns of belief... It had been about freeing ourselves to walk on the sun. I wonder once again, looking around at the chatting people, if they grasp the true nature of what we did.

The moon has risen into the sky during the time it has taken to rake the four fires into the glowing rectangles, each one about four feet wide and twelve feet long. The drum beat has intensified, matching the n/um in the group. The energy is palpable as I step away from the pathways and indicate that the fires are ready to be walked. This moment is always one of quiet intensity for me. It is a moment when I, like all the participants, am in disbelief at the audacity, perhaps even foolhardiness, of our undertaking. I glance at the mountain peak above us, a brief connection to that which stands in permanent beauty within all that is, a touch of a prayer for support from the invisible. Then one person approaches the coals and with focused intent walks across them, feet on red-hot coals. He gently steps off the glowing path and an exuberant yell of joy and success emanates from him. It is echoed by the group as more and more people cross the coals. Some walk fast, others slow, some dance, while others walk repeatedly, in total disbelief and delight. The atmosphere around the fire becomes celebratory as people rejoice in their own and their co-workers success.

In the hotel conference room later people share their experience:

"I will never be limited by my fears again!"

"I can't believe I did it! I feel like I can do anything now."

"There was a moment of incredible fear, but when I made the decision to go, it turned to excitement."

"I was sure all night long I was not going to do it. But when we were out with the fires I felt, I guess it's what you call n/um, and I danced those coals. I danced on them!"

There is a round of applause for the company for having the courage and far-sightedness to bring something as life altering as the firewalk to its employees. They express a sense of excitement about the challenges facing the company and using the tools learned here tonight to meet those challenges.

The evening ends with a buffet. People sit and stand in clusters continuing to share their experience with lots of excitement and laughter. I feel confident as I watch them that the objective of the firewalk has been met, that many of the barriers this company had been experiencing have melted in the heat of those fires. And I can't help thinking that there is more. As a friend of mine who works in organizational development put it so aptly: "I'm not interested in turning these people into better and better donkeys, who can carry bigger and bigger loads up steeper mountains for their company." I wonder if people grasped what we did here tonight, that it was more than a challenge faced or barrier overcome. For a moment in time we knew our limitless nature, allowing it to carry us beyond our beliefs into an experience which can heal, nurture and rejuvenate. And that experience, when kept alive, can guide, direct and give meaning to our lives.

A medicine man once said: "I remember the elders talking about the shaman, Golden Sky, who was in trance and walked unharmed through hot embers, left from the council fire. Golden Sky has said: 'Greater magic than this is performed by all who have been able to destroy their patterns of belief. The greatest magic is in confronting all fears squarely and completely. Such a person can walk on the sun'."

Tonight had not been about firewalking. It had been about facing our fears squarely and giving up our patterns of belief which keep us locked in a universe too small for our spirits. It had been about freeing ourselves to walk on the sun. I wonder once again, looking around at the chatting people, if they grasp the true nature of what we did.

The next morning I get up for sunrise. I sit in the Jacuzzi on the top floor of the hotel, the mountains tower in the open air above me. I let the workshop from the night before run through my mind. I think that perhaps I am expecting too much for a group of corporate men and women, when I notice a solitary figure far below walking toward the gravel parking lot where the remains of the fires from the night before are still visible. This figure intrigues me, walking with purpose in the dawn toward the now darkened coal beds. He walks up to one and stoops down, touching the coals. He stands up and thoughtfully scratches his head. I remember my astonishment when, years ago, I went out to the fire bed the morning after a walk to find the coals still warm twelve hours later. The figure now paces off this first fire pit and then moves to do the same with the next one, as if the first might be some kind of illusion. He then backs off a bit and stands still, looking at the place where the night before the orange coals danced. Slowly he lifts his head to the tallest mountain, the pink of the rising sun reflecting off the snowy peak. He folds his hands, palms together over his heart, and for a moment, his face lifted to the peak, he stands. He then drops his hands and with purpose strides toward the hotel.

The sun may be rising on the corporate world.

References:

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