

A Brief History of Firewalking

by Peggy Dylan

Fire worship practiced as a rite of purification, healing, initiation and transcendence has been a thread in the cultural tapestry of our planet. Many tribal people had, or have, rituals and ceremonies to honor the sacred aspect of fire, honoring its gifts and acknowledging its power. Fire worship and firewalking has nourished and warmed the human spirit since the dawning of mankind, today firewalking has evolved into a powerful tool for self-realization and empowerment.

Many of the natural environments of our planet are dependent on the cleansing and purifying aspects of fire. Wildfires clear the way for new growth, which many animal and plant species depend on for survival. Just as the planet requires fire for renewal so does the human spirit, as we are always intrinsically connected with this earth from which we grew. Our relationship to fire is as old as the human race. Recent evidence suggests that Australopithecus controlled fire nearly a million and half years ago.

The beginnings of firewalking are lost in the annals of history, but we do know that Africa, often considered the birthplace of mankind, has a long history of firewalking and fire dancing. The African-born Hindus walk on fire regularly as part of important religious festivals and !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari desert have firewalked since their tribal beginnings. The !Kung use fire in their powerful healing ceremonies.

In 1977, anthropologist Laurens van der Post published an account of his travels to Africa to study the !Kung and was astonished when witness to their healing fire dances. And, Richard Katz, a Harvard Psychologist reports that the !Kung use the fire to heat up their energy, which they call n/um :

Dancers will go in the fire, walk in it, put their heads in it, pick up the coals and rub them over their hands and body... when the n/um (or energy) in the body is boiling and as hot as the fire, they will not be burned. As the n/um intensifies in the healers they experience an enhanced consciousness called !kia , during which they heal all those at the dance.

In Bali, the mystical South Sea Island, it is not the men who dance on the fire, but young girls. In India, Tibet, Sri Lanka, China, Japan and Argentina, to mention a few, people dance and walk, joyously, solemnly, exuberantly, or devotionally across fire. In the Hindu fire ceremony Agni Hotra, fire is used to purify the physical and spiritual atmosphere, and in Peru the flame is used to spiritually uplift participants in the fire-ceremony.

The oldest recorded firewalk was over 4000 years ago in India. Two Brahmin priests were competing to see who could walk further, one managed to do so and his feat was written down in the historical records of that time. In a 17th century letter a Jesuit priest, Father Le Jeune, writes to his superior, telling of a healing firewalk he witnessed among the North American Indians. He reports of a sick woman walking through two or three hundred fires with bare legs and feet, not only without burning, but all the while complaining about the lack of heat she was feeling. Some 30 years later, Father Marquette reported similar firewalks among the Ottawa Indians and Jonathan Carver writes in his 1802 book Travels in North America that one of the most astounding sights he saw was the parade of warriors who would "walk naked through a fire... with apparent immunity."

Other North American Indians who were known to have shamanic traditions which included fire handling were the Fox, Menomini, Kere, Blackfeet and particularly the Zuni, who had, and some claim still have, a "great fire fraternity." The Kahunas, or native priests of the Hawaiian Islands, had powerful practices of lava waking.

All around this little globe people rely on their spiritual kinship with this dynamic element to bring them closer to their true nature and, through touching the fire of their spirit, feel renewed and healed.

Firewalking in Modern Times I am often called the mother or originator of the firewalking movement. Given the history of firewalking, as practiced throughout recorded time on nearly every continent on the planet, that seems a rather unlikely title, quite like calling myself the mother of the human race because I have given birth to children. What I will take credit for is bringing firewalking into the public eye and allowing it to re-emerge in Western culture as a practice for people who are exploring consciousness and personal power. Through more than two decades of teaching firewalking and firewalk instructors in the United States and abroad I have had the honor of developing a modern comprehension of this ancient ritual and training others so this time-tested practice could also benefit the modern era.

Incorporating firewalking into my seminars and teaching began when I returned from a personal pilgrimage to India in 1981. The following spring I walked on fire for the first time with Tolly Burkan. I realized immediately what a powerful tool firewalking could be in a seminar setting if truly explored and developed. At the time I was introduced to firewalking it was sometimes used as a surprise beginning to small weekend retreats where the participants were asked to keep it secret after taking part in the event. In these early settings, much to the shock of his group, Tolly would whip off his socks and shoes after singing around a campfire and quickly cross the coals. The entire "teaching" of how to walk on fire I witnessed back then amounted to 9 words "do what I do and you won't get burned" ...and a smile. Modern firewalking has come a long way since then! Because of the quality and emphasis on safety in modern firewalking, when asked about the birth of the modern firewalking movement, I hesitate to reply that Tolly trained me to firewalk. A more equitable answer is that both Tolly and I were "shown" firewalking but we created the seed of a powerful seminar built around this ancient ritual together. In the beginning we combined tools from both of our backgrounds to create the first large public workshops. We developed the training for firewalk instructors two years later and formed a somewhat fiery, short-lived but productive partnership that lasted four years.

I had been leading workshops internationally and had developed the Spiritual Reality Training, a weeklong intensive, which later was to become the base of our Firewalk Instructor's Training. The first Firewalk Instructor's Training was held in 1984. In 1984 I also incorporated my company, SUNDOR. Tolly and I dissolved our partnership in 1986 and he retired from teaching public firewalking and firewalk instructors until the turn of the century.

In 2004 SUNDOR celebrated its 20th birthday. The memories of the early beginnings of modern firewalking, the experimentation, research and exploration that we undertook in the early 80's is much cherished. We explored which woods were best, if one could walk on bark, how deep and long the coal-bed should be, and the ideal mental state people should be in when firewalking. The question we answered was how do we take this potentially dangerous activity and make it both safe and powerful for Western people? Although those early years were difficult at times, those raw experiences provided the seed from which I developed the modern ritual, as it is known today, by continuing for these last two decades to explore and teach and train. Now as I teach with the support of my expert staff and Steve Brougher, my partner of 16 years by my side, the firewalk has matured into a true vehicle for transformation.

During the booming economics of the early nineties, the firewalk caught the attention of managers and corporations as a way to inspire creativity and empower visions of higher horizons in their employees. Corporations as diverse as Microsoft, Coca-Cola, American Express and Pierce-Waterhouse participated in firewalks led by instructors, with great success. After the 11th of September 2001, I received an e-mail from an American Express employee in New York expressing her gratitude with the words "I don't know how we would have survived these last few weeks without the tools you gave us". The American Express building was damaged in the catastrophe and they were at the heart of the disaster.

The firewalk was touching a new culture from small spiritual groups to thousands in corporate conferences. The firewalk as a tool for personal empowerment and a ritual for spiritual communion had been born in the West.

SUNDOR's International Firewalking School has continued to grow. For nearly two decades my staff, the Master Firewalk Instructors, and I, have been training instructors around the planet. SUNDOR now has firewalk instructors doing excellent work all over the globe and offices in numerous countries worldwide. This organization that I began in the early 1980s has grown into a

large international community that is not only the most experienced and wide-reaching school for firewalking, but is sponsoring a host of other exciting activities as well.

The name SUNDOOR comes from an Inuit teaching. Ancient myth says that there are seven doors to pass through on the path of spiritual development. The SUNDOOR is the seventh and final door on this journey to awakening. I had little idea of the beauty and transcendent power of the firewalk when I named my company. But in these years of witnessing thousands of people crossing the fire and using that experience as a portal to their spirit, I now know it was aptly named.

Through SUNDOOR I have attempted to keep the ancient heritage of firewalking pure in our courses. The experience people are having is truly remarkable. The firewalk is allowing people in western cultures to experience a depth of healing, inspiration and life altering change not usually available to us. Despite this I realize that we have only just begun to explore the fantastic potential of this ancient ritual and am truly excited to see where this ancient path of fire will lead us in the future.

I want to thank the following sources for their excellent material that I used in my research. They are listed in the order in which I incorporate them within the article:

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Peggy Dylan is often referred to as the driving force behind the contemporary firewalking movement. She is the founder/director of SUNDOOR, an international foundation devoted to exploring and teaching excellence in the field of human potential. This article may be reproduced in its entirety without permission of the author.