NOMAD: Now More Than Ever ~ A Personal Reflection

by Barbara Ruth

This marks the first new newsletter I have had to put together since the 2001 NOMAD festival last October — and since the events of September 11. In the process of working on it, I could not keep from reflecting on why something like NOMAD continues to matter at such a time. During the final planning stages of the festival, we were still in something of a state of shock. While there was never any doubt about holding the festival, we couldn't help but feel at times as though, in the face of the enormity of what had just happened, what we were doing was an indulgence in sheer frivolity.

In choosing to go forward with that festival, however, in planning for future festivals, and in all the many ways members of the NOMAD Committee, and performers and participants work throughout the year at keeping music and dance alive in our communities, we are, I am convinced, responding to those events in a meaningful way.

NOMAD encourages us to appreciate other cultures, by bringing music and dance from other countries to our festival, teaching us to value others' cultural heritage. But there is also a deeper level at which the festival affirms our common humanity. According to anthropologists, music and dance are among the things that exist in every human society — while the forms vary enormously from culture to culture (and even within our own society people differ over what even constitutes music or dance, much less what makes some worthwhile or not), there are no human cultures that lack music and dance, or indeed that fail to demonstrate a deep reverence for these things. This tells us that there is an inborn need within the human psyche for music and dance. NOMAD is an expression of our humanity, our commonality with the entire human race, throughout the world and throughout time.

At the same time it is universal, our music and dance activities provide us with specific connections to others. For many of us they are a source of community, for some the most significant source of community. In my own experience, over the past decade and a half my deepest friendships and most important relationships have emerged from the contra and English country dance community. My life moves to the seasons of the dance calendar, the festivals, the balls, the summer camps.

For the past few years, I have also been a participant in an off-shoot of the dance world, an Internet discussion list on English country dancing, virtually "meeting" and connecting with people over the subject of this shared passion, even without ever seeing them in real life. In the aftermath of September 11, that Internet group became a key source of solace, of connection and comfort for many of us. Over the weeks that followed people checked in to the list with their thoughts, fears, hopes, and with descriptions of how their "home dance" had responded. Spontaneously, around the country, and around the world, English dance communities adopted the practice of closing their evenings with Fried de Metz Herman's composition, Peace Be with You, using the language of our dance to express that timeless longing of our hearts.

Music and dance by themselves are not going to stop hate or war, no matter how multicultural our festival becomes. But by continuing to celebrate these as cherished gifts, we fight hatred by affirming the goodness there can be in life. Through music and dance, at NOMAD and elsewhere, we take hands both literally and symbolically, acknowledging our commonality, sharing our human need for connection.

"NOMAD – Now More Than Ever" was an editorial that CDSS member Barbara Ruth wrote for a recent issue of the NOMAD Muse, an occasional newsletter of the NOMAD festival — NOMAD stands for Northeast Music, Art and Dance — that takes place each fall in Connecticut. It was reprinted with permission in the CDSS News, issue #169, November/December 2002.