

Snake Dance in the Candian North

by Lyn Hartley

*There are strange things done in the midnight sun by the men who moil for gold
The Arctic trails have their secret tales that make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen strange sights, but the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge when I cremated Sam McGee.*

—Robert Service, *The Cremation of Sam McGee*

Let me set the scene for you—fluffy white snow gently falling, on a crisp autumn night in the Yukon. With the fresh snow comes a muffled stillness. The only sound is from the snow geese overhead, chattering directions to each other on their migration south. It seems to be a ripe time to try something new.

This past October, I facilitated a leadership session for environmentalists at a training center on Lake Lebarge. And as the Robert Service's poetry suggests, the shores of Lake Lebarge have seen many strange sights. I figured this was the right place to push the envelope of the usual leadership activities and decided to try some of the movement exercises I had learned at the Authentic Leadership Summer Program from artists Steve Clorfeine and Lanny Harrison.

As soon as I walked into the training facility—a large hall with shiny floors—I knew it was screaming to be transformed into a dance studio. After a day of sitting in chairs and working on leadership styles, the group seemed receptive to a change in the workshop flow. At the end of the day, I invited them to come to “an evening of leadership through movement.”

While they were at dinner, I pushed back all the chairs, rolled up the carpet, and then dimmed the lights. Perhaps it was the stillness of the snowy night, but when the group entered the hall, there was an immediate sense of reverence.

To get the group into the groove, we started with some of the movement exercises Steve had taught at the Summer Program. Trying all sorts of paces and speeds, we explored the room though our arms and legs. It took a little coaxing, but soon we were moving down from our cerebral minds and back into our feeling bodies.

The trust level was high and people were really getting into exploring. Now seemed the time to move into Lanny's “snake dance.” Luckily, I had brought some world beat music with strong drumming and exotic instrument sounds.

Half the group became the audience, and the other half the performers. I gave the performing group simple instructions: “The person at the front of the line leads the movement and the rest of you just follow what the person in front of you does.”

What unfolded over the next 45 minutes was truly transformational. It was as if people had forgotten themselves, and their often hidden authentic selves began to emerge. The movement cut straight through ego's self-conscious trappings. It was

an exhilarating experience for not only the dancers, but for also the audience. With sweat dripping down our foreheads, nobody wanted to stop, though we finally switched places with the audience, who took their turn at dancing.

In our debrief, participants talked about the dance—that it felt as though it had been choreographed and that there was something bigger and broader at play. The word “grace” came up in relationship to leadership, and participants spoke about finding this state both as leaders and followers.

For me, the highlight of the dance was the closing. The endings were a gradual unwinding of movement that ended in a calm stillness, much like the stillness of the freshly fallen snow. We all knew when the dance had ended and we felt perfection in that single moment.

Overall the training session was a success. But without any doubt, the highlight was experiencing our true nature through the snake dance. Once again, on the shores of Lake Lebarge, we experienced strange things when a group of environmental leaders turned into a troupe of graceful dancers.

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