

# dancing toward the one

AN INTERVIEW WITH

GABRIELLE ROTH

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IT IS ALWAYS DIFFICULT TO INTRODUCE ONE'S HEROES. Fortunately, for most readers of the Wild Heart Journal, Gabrielle Roth needs no introduction. World-renowned workshop leader, director, healer, author of *Maps to Ecstasy* and *Sweat Your Prayers*, and Artistic Director of the Mirrors who have recorded over a dozen CDs of shamanic dance music, she has turned thousands of people onto the inner rhythms of their dancing souls, the creative brilliance of their innate originality, and the unexpected daring to express themselves in art, theatre and dance. It is a privilege to present Gabrielle Roth on these pages, in a candid conversation conducted in her New York City loft last November.

**WHJ:** I want to take you back twenty years or so to your very first music tape, because the title, "Dancing Toward the One" seemed to express what our journal is about. Do you remember what it was you were pointing to with that title and is it still relevant to how you see your work today?

**GABRIELLE:** Yes it meant the same to me then as it does to me now: dancing toward the One is dancing into that level of disappearance, where you just disappear in the dance. Osho said it best, "Dance until the dancer disappears and only the dance remains." And I'm moving toward that state of consciousness all the time, whether I'm writing or dancing or just sitting on my couch. Losing the "I," falling so deeply into the moment, into the breath, into the beat of the heart, into what is real, what is truly going on, and being identified with that, with the dance, as opposed to being identified with the part of me that's chopping the dance up, observing the dance, judging it, comparing it—the thought patterns that are unrelenting. It's shifting the attention away from that part, that endless mind chatter, into the depths of the journey, into the dance which is continuous.

**WHJ:** To what extent can the creative process, in this case dance, serve as a spiritual path? I know, for example, that

when I dance until I drop, or until "the dancer disappears," the mind chatter and the ego will be waiting for me as soon as the music stops, to pick up where I left off. So is it a momentary excursion for you into the Zero Zone or is there a progression towards a dropping away more and more?

**GABRIELLE:** I think it's a progression. That chatter is waiting for all of us. The bus stops and we get off at the station



and there it is. I think it's about cultivating a certain kind of discipline where we learn how to shift our attention point. There's "awareness" which is this big field that we're sitting in, and I'm aware of what's going on in me and you're aware of what's going on in you, in a kind of total way. And then there's our "attention." Attention is the part of us that gets all sucked up into this mind chatter. So we learn to shift our attention point—I like to keep my attention point in my belly, in the rhythm of my breath. I watch it wander back upstairs to the chatroom, and as soon as I catch myself I invite it back down. So I think it's a continuous process. I should imagine that it's possible to reach that point where we're constantly in the Zero Zone, but I don't know anybody who has, and even the so-called gurus, or the benevolent dictators of the '70s, slip all the time, so who among us has ever been there full time?

**WHJ:** There are those in the spiritual and meditative worlds who throw out words like "absolute liberation" and "enlightenment" and "complete spiritual freedom."

**GABRIELLE:** It took me a long time to realize that the only freedom is freedom from myself, including the part of myself that wants enlightenment, that wants anything. That wanting self is my ego. Of course, it's possible that somebody out there could be completely free of their ego, but that's highly unlikely.

**WHJ:** I remember from my work in the theatre process with you that the ego had a different role—one used it, or transformed it, or transmuted it into something, as opposed to having it disappear.

**GABRIELLE:** Well I don't believe it ever disappears. That's what we're talking about. The concept of the ego disappearing so that we're like a "no-Self," that would be cool, but I can't imagine it—maybe I'm just so far away from that place that it's just unimaginable. But what I *can* imagine, and what I do try to attain in my day to day life, is some sense of awareness of it so that I have a choice. And in the theatre work, I never thought for a second that we could transform our ego, but rather, we were working to transform our identification with it.

Most of us are unconscious of our ego patterns, so I

was attempting to inspire consciousness of the characters that rule our soap opera. And as we become aware of them, make fun of them, they lose their power. In a conversation, there's the realization: "Oops, there goes Sissy Space-out, or there goes Danny D. Presso working the room again." We can step back from this drama and begin to witness ourselves as if we were in the last row of a theater watching a movie of our life. We can seek refuge in our breath and the dance. I mean for me *God is the dance, the motion, the forward thrust, the Force*. It's like a big Star Wars universe that we're in and there's

this amazing Force that's completely mysterious and just keeps chugging along.

**WHJ:** Is that what your new book is about?

**GABRIELLE:** It *is* about the mystery, but how do you write about the mystery? I'm completely in the dark about a book that I'm writing about the dark, so maybe it's appropriate. And that *is* the creative process for me—it comes out of the dark. You're just sitting there one day and all of a sudden an idea floats in that you grab, and then you begin to gather ideas around it and just hold this vision of something, and eventually it begins to take some kind of form, some kind of structure, and it gets out of your head onto a piece of paper, onto a stage, onto a canvas.

Then you start to really relate with it, which takes us into that chaotic place which is the heart and soul of the creative process. It's almost like the hunter-gatherer, happening inside the context of our psyche. Gathering information, hunting down different forms to hold it, and experienc-

ing the brilliance and the chaos of the creative process when it takes over and just starts using *you*. I love that—that's the most exciting thing, when you're being played by some unknown, unseen force that drives you to paint, or drives you to write or direct.

The only thing is that as artists we really need to be grounded so that we're not swept away by this, so that we're not destroyed by it, so that we can maintain it. It's intuitive intelligence at it's highest. It takes us to that imaginative realm where we're making stuff up from



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scratch, where we've created entire worlds. The sci-fi fantasy fiction masters can blow me away. Like Atanasio—in every book he creates his own world.

As artists we're striving for that place where we are blown to bits—that little "I" we were talking about? That creepy little, crawly, chattering chipmunk, always storing little nuggets of nasty, small-minded energies. That part gets swept away by this creative force—and at the same time, I want to keep the rest of me intact with my feet on the ground.

**WHJ:** Can you even relate to the more staid spiritual teachers who speak of disciplined meditative practices leading toward particular states of liberation?

**GABRIELLE:** Well I can *relate* to them—it's not my path, it's not my way, it's not what I want. And in terms of spiritual work, we need all kinds for all kinds of journeys, because it's so specific and individual. I just happen to represent a path that's more funky and feisty and rebellious and artistic and wild. I created this dancing form because it was difficult for me, in my tight, tense, Western culture, driven by the 4/4 beat of rock 'n' roll, to just sit and stare at a candle. I'm all for those who can do it, by the way. I just couldn't. It was so much easier for me to meditate, to reach my inner core, during and after I emptied in the dance. The best way for me to still my mind—the point of meditation—is to move my body. It's funny. They say that the whole world of psychiatry would look a lot different if Freud had had a better relationship with his mother. I guess we all do what we have to do. All I can do is dance.

**WHJ:** I had a discussion with one teacher, trying to represent art as a viable spiritual path, and he challenged me to name the enlightened artists that have used the creative process to arrive at such a place. I came up with Blake and Whitman, but my list was short...

**GABRIELLE:** Shakespeare comes to mind, Isadora Duncan, Sam Shepard, Peter Brook, Thich Nhat Hanh, certainly Gurdjieff was moving in that direction as an artist, not to mention Rumi, for God's sake. But we have to get rid of this halo concept, this picture of what enlightenment looks like. Probably enlightenment is pretty ordinary looking—there's probably an endless list of people we've never heard of. I would say to that teacher, "I'm sorry your mind is so narrow." I mean that's so superior, it makes me want to choke. That's exactly what I've been rebelling against all this time—Who the fuck knows what enlightenment looks like? In fact, who really even knows what it is?

**WHJ:** But it's also true that some of our greatest creative people have miserably unhappy lives, so it seems that the creative process in and of itself isn't necessarily sufficient for...

**GABRIELLE:** No no no, you're right—no process in and



I feel the kind of theatre I do is like the Tibetan Sand Mandalas—if you're there to see it, that's great, and if you're not, it's impermanent, it will disappear.

of itself can bring you to a spiritually-charged existence. It's an attitude, it's *why* you're doing something, and it's being able to step back from yourself. What part of you is playing this drama out? Is it a soul drama or an ego drama? There are a whole lot of egotistical artists. And there are a whole lot of faux Jesus spiritual seekers. But, there are also artists who, through that process, are delivered to a more soulful way of existing. But if that's not what you want, it's probably not what you're going to get.

It has always been my yearning, to dance toward the One, to dance cheek to cheek with God. Art is my vehicle. I look at my work as living art. My workshops are experimental theatre pieces that I direct. It's exhilarating to direct these living theatre processes. The only people who ever get to see them are the people who are in them. My work is urban/zen theater, in the moment—it's there and then it's gone, but it's as good as a lot of what I've seen in legitimate venues. It *is* theatre. It presents and dramatizes the human condition with flair, humor, feeling and energy.

**WHJ:** That reminds me of the Tibetan Sand Mandalas.

**GABRIELLE:** That's beautiful—I feel the kind of theatre I

do *is* like the Tibetan Sand Mandalas—if you’re there to see it, that’s great, and if you’re not, it’s impermanent, it will disappear.

**WHJ:** As a charismatic leader with many people who enjoy and appreciate what you offer—what keeps you in check? Is your own inner authority sufficient? Because that certainly hasn’t worked for lots of other leaders in this field—many of them have crashed and burned.

**GABRIELLE:** Only those who needed power *over* somebody. My Sufi training was really strong. I really appreciate and deeply honor Oscar Ichazo for the teachings he gave to me. I don’t think I could do what I do without having had that training, because it was through his work that I got to know my own ego, so therefore I do have a checkpoint, I do have some part of myself that is aware of my own tendencies. And I track that pretty carefully.

And also, I was always a really reluctant teacher, and it all happened kind of in spite of me, rather than something I set out to do, or planned or wanted in a conscious way. And I don’t like hierarchies. I really think in a circular pattern, a very tribal pattern, and I’ve manifested my work in that pattern. It’s a feminine model of spiritual practice: there’s a lot of space and permission in it, a lot of fluidity and freedom for people to be exactly who they are. And it’s very Tantric in that it’s not based on the polarities of “good and bad” and all that—it’s based on the notion that we’re all of it, and none of it. It’s just where you happen to be in any particular moment of time.

So I sit at a certain place in that circle because I did create the momentum of it—but every other person in it also has a particular function, a story, a gift to give. I really honor and respect that. I’m definitely not alone in all this and I seek the counsel of the other people in the circle. It’s never a closed circle—it always has to be open. It all hangs together with this great vast Nothing in the

center of it. Actually, the deeper we meditate on that vast, beloved Nothingness, the easier it is to experience that there’s really only one person here. One breath. One body—with a multidimensional soul.

I mean I don’t purport to know anything—I’m probably the dumbest person of all the people who have ever found themselves in my position—I really am. I don’t know! I just don’t know! I show up, I dance! One of the things I’ve noticed is that many of the other people who are “teachers” keep a real distance between themselves and their students, which I’ve never done.

For me it’s always been about the *teaching*, the *work* is the teacher—I’ve never really identified myself as the “one who knows.” I’ve been more like the “one who’s desperate to know!” And “Thank you so much for showing up so I don’t have to do this by myself!” That’s been my attitude, and still is. I’m desperate to know God, to know love—and I’ve always looked at the work as the teacher, and so when we’re doing it, we each have to look to ourselves for what it is teaching us. It could be teaching me how to slow down or speed up, or how to break through self-consciousness, or find my feet. In any one session, ten thousand different teachings may be happening.

**WHJ:** Can you say anything about the role psychedelics and marijuana have played in your creative process?

**GABRIELLE:** Well I’m a child of the ’60s so I certainly took psychedelics—lots of organic ones. And they certainly expanded my mind at the time—I don’t know what the long term effect was. And certainly I spent my time as a stoner, there’s no question about that—but I don’t do anything now, and I find that it allows for a very clear channel.

I have to say in support of marijuana that I do feel that it slowed me down. There was a point in my life when I felt like I was on organic speed. I was running from myself at such a high speed, like I was

(GABRIELLE ROTH CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7) on a high speed chase, and I think that marijuana played a very positive role in that it slowed me down and shut me up and allowed things to brew inside of me that then began to come out. So there was a point in my process where it was a catalyst in a very positive way.

The problem with us, particularly Western people, is that we don't entertain things as catalysts. We get addicted to them, we're excessive. That's why the Native Americans sat around laughing in the tobacco fields: they knew we weren't going to use it as some little prayerful paean to Father Sky, but that we would become nicotine addicts and it would destroy us. So that's the part of us that we really have to attend to—the needy, hungry, insatiable creatures that we can be.

So it creates a tension in me to even say that marijuana was a positive growth experience for me, knowing that for some people it could be something quite different, a big escape from the real world. We have to know who we are, and what our limitations are, what our tendencies and patterns are, for better for worse. It comes down to Socrates: Know Thyself. Know what you can handle and what you can't. And Aristotle: Moderation in all things. The heavy dudes said it all. They wrapped it up in two or three short sentences, and nothing is different. Those are still the guidelines.

I spend a lot of time in recording studios, and it has made me very compassionate towards those rock musicians who have gone into the shadow worlds of drugs. You go on the road for nine months or a year, and then you're in the studio—you're in these unreal worlds, and you're constantly having to be creative, without ever really getting the rest, the time to regenerate, and I can see how a lot of people fall into the illusion that some drug is going to spark their creativity at four in the morning, when they have no juice, when they've become unplugged from the Great Source.

And that's why, especially as artists, we absolutely need to be able to mother ourselves, and nurture ourselves, and make sure that we have a lot of space and relaxation from which all things come. And we have to be able to father ourselves and protect that space, to have lines and boundaries. It always comes down to these archetypal worlds for me—the “Mother,” the “Father.” *Sweat Your Prayers* for me was a map, saying “Okay, these are the internal energy fields that we need to have a grip on in order to materialize as artists, as lovers, as whole people, as seekers in this wild whirly world, so that we don't become lost souls in the process of creating.

We have to be able to be gods, lovers and artists, we have to be soulful if we're going to be happy, if we want peace, and the soul is the part of us that is the creative process. And how do we access those soulful states of being as opposed to the ego states of being, and how do we know the difference? These are real questions, and they're the ones that have driven me. What does it mean to be a human being? That's the initial question for me. What does it really mean? I'm still working on that question.

