

I've put off writing this article on the purifying aspects of fire because my eyes itch and run, as does my nose. I'm coughing and sneezing, my chest hurts and my brain seems to be so pre-occupied with these body sensations that coherent thinking is an almost impossible task. I've spent a good deal of time over the last two weeks amused at my need to postpone writing, as with every breath I took in more of the irritating culprit, smoke: **smoke from the immense wildfires started by lightning**, now burning in the California Sierras around my home. One fire alone has charred over seventy thousand acres in the Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite Park. The smoke causes the sun to rise blood red, giving the day an eerie hue and reminding me to keep those tissues close at hand as I am going to wheeze and sneeze through another day of fire purification.

Many tribal people had, or have, rituals and ceremony to honour the sacred aspect of fire, honouring its gifts and acknowledging its power. Most Americans fear fire beyond the Sunday afternoon barbecue and for decades we have, in a systematic way, attempted to control it. This scientific manipulation of a powerful element is now backfiring as our wild lands, ripe with tinder from years of fire suppression are, on a yearly basis, burning out of control. Scientists today are confirming the ancient wisdom that fire plays an important part in our ecosystem and is vital to the renewal of the planet.



A recent article in **National Geographic** quotes **Stephen Pyne**, an Arizona State University historian who has spent his life studying the subject as saying: "We are uniquely fire creatures on a uniquely fire planet." Our planet, he says, is primed for ignition, "stuffed with organic fuels, its atmosphere saturated with oxygen, its surface pummelled by lightning." Many of the natural environments of our planet are dependent on the cleansing and purifying aspects of fire.

Fire produces nutrients more quickly than decay, many pine cones require the heat of a fire to pop open to free their seeds, grasslands burn to get rid of the stubble which shades and crowds new life, and birds like the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker thrive only in areas regularly burned.

The Native Americans used fire to herd deer and bison and kept grasslands green by burning young trees and dead grass. Many scientists believe it was the Indian's **fire stick** and lightning which shaped the American landscape as it emerged from the last Ice Age. 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.

**Fire worship is as old as the human race.**

According to one North American Indian legend, fire was first sparked by buffalo hooves thundering across the plains. The Maoris of New Zealand believe it was a gift from a god's blind grandmother, who drew it from her fingernails by magic.

In the legends of the Huachipayri Indians of the Amazon basin in Peru, fire was brought



by a woodpecker. They still call his name and imitate his call when making fire with fire sticks in their ceremonies. Recent evidence suggests that Australopithecus controlled fire nearly a million and half years ago.

As the continuity of life became associated with the continuity of fire, the symbol of perpetual fire arose. In Rome, if the eternal flame in the temple of Vesta, Goddess of the hearth, went out, all activity in the temple had to stop: the connection between heaven and earth represented by the fire had to be restored at once. The Osage Indians maintained a Sacred fire in their chief's hut: its holy flames were thought to bring life and health. Fire worship practiced as a rite of purification, healing, initiation, devotion and proof of faith or divine connection has been a thread in the cultural tapestry of our planet.

For many early Christians fire immunity was considered **a mark of grace**, and the annals of history are well spiced with accounts of monks and martyrs who were blessed with this capacity. One of my favourites is **Francis of Paola** who died in 1507 (not to be confused with St. Francis of Assisi, the saint so loved by animals). Francis of Paola was born to Italian peasants and seems to have handled fire as easily as other people handle a shovel. He used his amazing capacities with fire to help the very hard lives of the local farming community: walking into the red-hot kiln to shore it up when it was about to collapse, reaching into the forge to hand the blacksmith a piece of red hot iron, etc. The capacity he had with fire eventually came to the attention of the church and, in due course, they sent church dignitaries to check him out.



As the Christian dogma evolved we see the myth of hell-fire and damnation take hold and slowly fire becomes synonymous with Evil. In the early 1920's, British missionaries in South Africa realized they had a curious problem. The natives seemed decidedly unperturbed by the threats of hell-fire awaiting the unconverted: Africa 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 witness to one of their healing fire dances:

In Bali, the mystical South Sea island, it is not the men who dance on the fire, but young girls as the Balinese believe the gods to be "**children of the people**" and thus most of the trance-dances are performed by children. In India, Tibet, Sri Lanka, China, Japan and Argentina, to mention a few,

**Richard Katz, a Harvard Psychologist**

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 it is used to spiritually uplift participants in the fire-ceremony.

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.**

reports that the !Kung use the fire to heat up their energy, which they call n/um:

"It is quite easy for you to do these things, they told him," because you are a peasant and used to hardship. But if you were of gentle blood you would not be able to live in this way." "Quite true, replied Francis smiling, "I am a peasant." They were sitting near a big fire to ward off the winter cold.

"And if I were not, I would not be able to do things like this." With that he reached into the nearby blaze and grabbed a handful of burning logs and embers. Holding them in his hands he said to the canon: "You see, I could not do this if I were not a peasant." The canon then prostrated himself on the ground and sought to kiss Francis' hands and feet, but the saintly peasant would not allow it. Francis of Paoloa was canonized in 1519 with countless witnesses present to testify to his amazing abilities".

But lest you put down this writing with a sense of "but what about North America?" I will give you a little of our fire heritage: In a 17th century letter a Jesuit priest, **Father Le Jeune**, writes to his superior, telling of a healing firewalk he witnessed among the 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, Keres, 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 as the following report will demonstrate.

In his youth, **ethnologist William Tufts Brigham** walked over semi-molten lava in Hawaii along with three Kahunas. Before stepping onto the lava the priests tied Ti leaves to their ankles and chanted archaic Hawaiian songs to the goddess Pele. Barefoot, one of them **trotted onto the red-hot lava** and, as Brigham watched open-mouthed, he was pushed onto the lava himself! Still wearing his boots and socks he ran for the other side of the flow which, despite the broiling heat, he reached safely. The soles of his shoes and his socks were



burned through, but his feet were fine, as were the feet of the Kahunas, though their Ti leave anklets were also charred. This very rational doctor had the following to say about his experience: "The Kahunas use magic in their fire-walking as well as many other things. There is one set of natural laws for the physical world and another for the other world. And, try to believe this if you can: The laws of the other side are so much the stronger, that they can be used to neutralize and reverse the laws of the physical."



Despite the rational, mental, mono-culture in our country, proliferated by our schooling system and the media, I am quite happy to be able to say that fire worship, handling and walking has not died out in America. **Some Christian churches today use fire handling as a dynamic demonstration of the power of their faith** as reported by Dr. Kane in "Ethos", the journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology. Kane spent sixteen months studying Christian fire handlers in six southern states. His subjects were active witnesses for Christ in the same Holiness churches that interpret snake handling and speaking in tongues as evidence of God's presence. During what Kane calls "the tumultuous portion" of the religious service, fire handlers direct flames from kerosene torches directly onto their bare feet, hands and faces. They attribute their immunity to the protection of the Holy Ghost. "Nothin' can penetrate it, not even bullets," one worshiper told Kane.

...they (the !Kung dancers) seemed to pass into a dimension of reality far out of reach of my understanding, and to a moment and place which belonged only technically to the desert in which we were all gathered. Indeed so obsessed did the men become with their 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."



**I am often called the mother or originator of the firewalking movement. Given the history I've just written about, 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 the Western culture as a practice for people who are

It is merely meant to point out that we are just beginning to explore the inner fire of spirit and that we have little to no history of ecstatic practices within our culture to draw on. We don't gather with our families in town squares for communal healings, wild, rollicking dances around fires, or exhilarating ceremonies of devotion and thanksgiving to the Infinite. Our Puritan Christian past has all but eliminated our capacity for transcending the mundane and reaching beyond our human experience into healing altered states.

exploring consciousness and personal power.

Compared with the intensity of the other culture's firewalking ceremonies, ours is a rather mild affair. That statement is not meant to deny the transformative experiences people have firewalking in the western cultures, as the depth of **healing, inspiration and life-altering change** is truly remarkable.

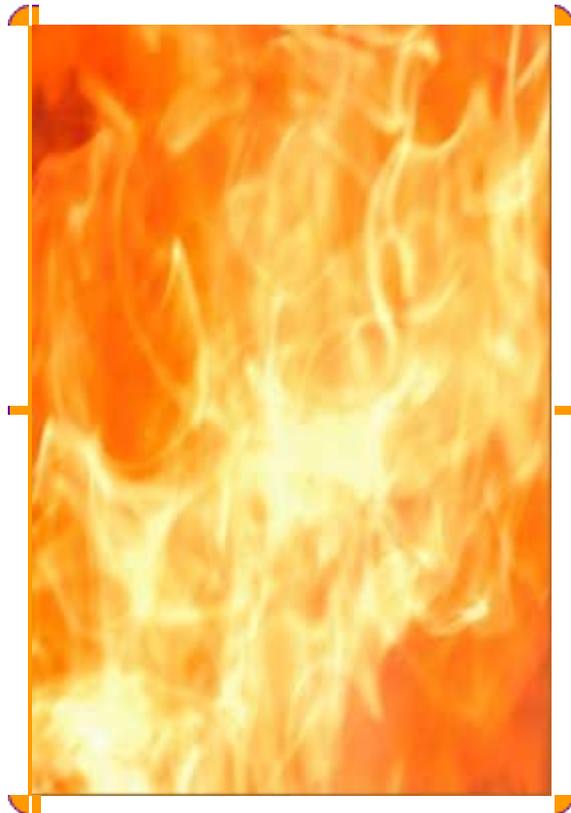
I see the firewalk as the budding of these practices within our culture, an affirmation of even **our capacity to tap that inner source of energy**. Energy, N/um, chi, prana, ki, life-force, by any name, is that fire of spirit, the inner fire: fire which our accepted cultural behavior and many established religions have attempted to snuff out. And we see the results of it, we live in a community of people where fire suppression has been practiced too long, a society packed with ignitable tinder, people ready to explode at any moment, where violence is a way of life.

Nature is teaching us that our wild lands need to burn for renewal and, in the same way, we human beings need to renew ourselves by allowing the inner fires, the fire of spirit, to burn passionately. Fire handling or firewalking is often seen by witnesses or even taken by the practitioner to be an external and visible sign of inward spiritual grace.

I see it differently. I see it as **a practice to learn how to allow that inner fire to burn hot**: inspiring, purifying, healing and guiding us as we wander down this path of life.

I have great hopes that, as we begin to comprehend the true benevolence of life and we realize hell-fire is but a myth, we will once again allow this most passionate element its rightful place in the cycle of purification and renewal. But until that time, wildfires will burn out of control. So, would someone please hand me those tissues?

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**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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