



Monica McAghon December 1999

"Danse Orientale for Mastectomy Recovery"

A testimonial by Monica McAghon

July 1999 -- "*Arabic dancing? You've got to be kidding.*" I looked at my friend Juanita in disbelief when she gave me the gift of six weeks of Arabic dancing lessons. I had been through the biopsy and diagnosis of breast cancer, a lumpectomy, a mastectomy, and was in the middle of chemotherapy. Nothing seemed more incongruous than Arabic dancing, but I went anyway.

About ten women of all shapes and sizes and ages showed up, and we shyly gathered together and exchanging light banter that didn't go deeper than "Hello, how are you doing. Where do you work?" We then fanned out across the polished wood dance floor, and Tahya introduced a few movements, slowly inviting us to "Step, lift the right hip; step, now lift the left hip." We added arm movements, swaying to the music of Hossam Ramzy, Egyptian percussionist ~ shoulder, elbow, wrist, lean; shoulder, elbow, wrist, lean ~ Dum-Dum-tek -dum- tek.

Pleasantly surprised, I loved the organic feel of it, how it swept my imagination and made me think of women along the Nile, and along the Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Admittedly, a romantic notion but one documented in ancient pictures from the time of the Goddesses Isis, Ishtar, and Astarte.

The psychological blow of my breast cancer, the loss to my femininity that I grieved, and the anger that replaced it with "I am not my breast" ~ all passed away. Transformed, I felt myself buoyed by a new sense of femininity, one that was deeply sensuous and yet spiritual at the same time.



Monica February 2002: A percussion goddess arisen!

*When dancing these centuries-old traditions,
it didn't matter that I had only one breast;
I felt more womanly than I had felt in a long time.
I was connected to movements rich in
women's history and healing rituals.*

Tahya made us all feel special. Each of us in her own way danced to the rhythm, honoring the lineage of these ancient steps, first conceived at the dawn of civilization, when women danced in reverence of their fertile bellies, entrancing themselves and their men and making childbirth easier.

After the surgery the surgeon looked at me with a mixture of sympathy and severity. "Build up your chest muscles with some exercise; you're scrawny," she said. Tahya's dance class focuses on lifting the arms and shoulders up and back in a way that gently massages the chest muscles. I couldn't think of a better way to exercise.

After my last chemotherapy treatment I immediately went to the Arabic dancing class. It made me forget the nausea, the bad taste of chemicals lingering on my tongue, the despair I felt at poisoning my good cells along with the remaining cancer cells. We danced with veils, tapped the rhythm on frame drums, circled the floor with finger cymbals and connected to movements rich in women's history and healing rituals.

