

## [Firewalking: a contemporary ritual and transformation](#)

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### **Abstract:**

Firewalking is an ancient ritual that can be categorized as a wondrous performance with a powerful effect on believers. The New Age movement is reviving the ceremony through workshops and seminars. The event involves a form of mutual social pretense that overcomes logical convention. A participant in a firewalk that became part of a documentary video describes the experience.

### **Article:**

Performances in the magical tradition have revived for many contemporary people the pleasures (and terrors) of personal transformation. Tired of more passive, spectator roles in orthodox religions and secular recreations, many individuals actively participate in their own transformation through the contemporary ceremonies revived in New Age movements (and other nonconventional religious movements). New Age rituals reflect a diversity of influences from Native American and African to Asian religious traditions. New Age rituals include practices such as channeling, astral projection, crystal healing, drumming, keening, smudging, and dancing. An awakened craving for transformation produces an exploitable market for spiritual experiences outside orthodox religious establishments, an "exotification" and appropriation of sacred knowledge (see Schechner 1993:228-63). Although these performances occur in a variety of rituals plucked from an assortment of cultural origins, this research will examine firewalking and a particular firewalking ritual in which I was a participant-observer. Finally, I argue that the mechanism that helps white, middle-class Americans breach logical convention and participate in firewalking and related rituals is a form of mutual pretense, a social ritual engaged to shield people from bleak realities and graceless moments.

### **Firewalking, the New Age, and Personal Drama**

The ritual of firewalking is an ancient one. Once consigned to shamans, such as the holy men of Fiji who walked uninjured over red-hot stones, firewalking became popularized in the United States in the 1980s as a technique for overcoming restrictive beliefs and phobias. In some traditional societies a magical performance such as firewalking involved a formal audience that watched rather than participated. Priests walked across the coals and laypeople were allowed to follow, but many watched as an audience or congregation. In the United States, however, firewalking has become a participatory ritual.

In the late 1970s, Tolly Burkan, a former professional magician and actor, began teaching firewalking workshops in California. A videotape of Burkan's seminars from the 1980s shows that he teaches his students to use firewalking as a tool for self-empowerment, incorporating his former magician's tricks into his lecture as a way of demonstrating ways to overcome FEAR--False Evidence Appearing Real (see Burkan 1984). From the videotape, Burkan's workshops seem less like a ritualistic performance and more like a salesmanship seminar designed to encourage a stronger, more energetic work force. Burkan teaches his students to think, "If I can walk on fire, I can do anything," including asking the boss for a raise.

Participants in commercial firewalking seminars, such as Burkan's workshop, pay a fee of one hundred dollars or more for the opportunity to test their own abilities toward positive thinking.(2) This fee would seem to place Burkan's workshops and other similar events squarely in the category of "diversions for the elite." However, the

many middle-income people who opt to participate in one of these firewalking seminars are likely to view the fee as an investment in their sadhana,(3) or life path, and not merely money spent on an evening's entertainment. In addition to the actual firewalk, Burkan's workshop includes a lecture in a classroom space, which also makes this event seem more like an educational investment than an entertaining adventure. The lecture on the creative power of the mind encourages students toward positive thinking. Outside, a bonfire burns down to a pile of hot coals and ashes. When the coals are ready and raked out into a twelve-foot path, the lecture culminates and participants gather to walk barefoot over the pathway of burning coals prepared for them. Not everyone can do it. Some people are blistered, some are burned, and some decide not to make the attempt. Burkan and others have come to regard successful firewalking, in which the participant's feet did not blister or burn, as evidence of the human mind's ability to interact with the body. This view of the firewalking experience made it an ideal ritual for the New Age movement, which has among its goals self-realization and higher human perception (Sky 1989).

### **Shams and Shamans and Wondrous Performances**

Firewalking falls into the category of "wondrous performances," which include pain immunity, psychic surgery, immunity to snake bites, and extrasensory perception. Healing effects from wondrous performances occur when audiences are emotionally aroused. This arousal triggers chemical reactions in the brain, which may have healing properties. We often associate wondrous performances with shams, cheats, and charlatans--those who are quick to sell snake oil to the gullible. However, it's important to mention that although wondrous performances can be faked, even fakes are able to produce powerful effects upon believers. Whether or not the shaman is sincere or whether the miraculous performance can be scientifically validated may not be central in considering a performance's very real impact on human life. For example, placebo effects, in which inert agents appear to cure disease, are common occurrences in medicine (see McClenon 1994:95-127). Skepticism about the mystical performances of alternative religions, including practices such as firewalking, is abundant within organized religious and secular groups. More established religions may perceive mystical performances as threats to established hierarchical systems (see Ingills 1977). Likewise, cultural institutions have a strong interest in reinterpreting the powerful experiences that individuals claim are the result of ritual performance. This reinterpretation usually engenders a consistent disbelief in the integrity of the performance. Secular media may ridicule the practices or label them as dangerous. Skeptics often debunk the successful firewalking ritual as a result of the Leidenfrost effect,(4) poor thermal conductivity, or some other acceptable "scientific" explanation (see Price 1936 and Walker 1991). Disbelief can be culturally useful. A citizenry too focused on either the mystical or spiritual realm may not be as productive within capitalistic, materialistic systems. Citizens who are too devout can seem subversive to the state and the social elite since they may put religious doctrines above the secular law. Institutions impose control by reproducing and transmitting the preferred ideology, diverting the images of contrary possibilities.

### **An Oak Ridge Firewalk**

#### ***Preparation, Transformation, Restoration***

I became interested in firewalking while working on *Wondrous Healing*, a television documentary I was producing and directing.(5) In the process of interviewing subjects for the documentary, I met several people who claimed physical or emotional healing as a result of participating in a firewalking ceremony. One respondent reported that his cancer went into remission following his firewalking experience, describing it as one of the most phenomenal experiences of his life. My coproducer for *Wondrous Healing*, sociologist James McClenon, has himself participated in more than a dozen firewalks while researching wondrous events and their effects on spiritual healing. McClenon's firewalking experiences include firewalking with the Buddhists of the Shingon sect at Mount Takao, Japan, and firewalking at the 1983 Esala Festival at Kataragama, Sri Lanka, where both Hindus and Buddhists participate (see McClenon 1994:115-27). Later, McClenon devised an ecumenical firewalking ceremony and led members of a meditation group in numerous firewalking rituals on an isolated beach in Okinawa. He also participated in American firewalking rituals, including those of Tolly Burkan. The more I heard about the firewalking phenomenon the more intrigued I became, encouraging McClenon to help me locate a ritual I could videotape for our documentary. I wanted to videotape this event because I thought it would visually define for my audiences the idea of wondrous performances and their

relationship to wondrous healing. McClenon began to pursue the possibilities. However, we soon encountered obstacles to videotaping a commercial firewalking workshop--among them cost and accessibility.

Light and Power Productions, a commercial enterprise that offers metaphysical and spiritual workshops, agreed to sponsor a firewalking event and locate participants. The participants would be nine individuals who learned about the event through word of mouth or Journey Notes, the newsletter for Light and Power Productions. The original cost for participants in the Oak Ridge workshop was \$11, but in an altruistic gesture, the workshop's hosts later waived the fee. From the beginning this firewalk would be unrestricted. I would be allowed to videotape whatever I wanted. So, from the outset a major purpose of this firewalk became "show," the documentation of a contemporary American firewalking ritual. My documentary crew for this shoot, videographer Matt Barr and his assistant Patricia Maine, would take the role of audience, remaining outside the aesthetic order of this performance to witness and record the event. I worried that the presence of a camera crew would in some way interfere with actors' abilities to submerge into the ritual. Confronted with spectators and cameras, I fretted that these nonprofessional "actors" might become self-conscious. This wasn't a trivial concern. Danforth reports that an experienced firewalker and workshop leader, Ken Cadigan, burned during a televised firewalk when reporters and television camera operators distracted him by "telling him what to do, where to stand and when to walk" (see Danforth 1989:249). Since I had decided to become a participant-observer, I understood firsthand how the camera might influence self-conscious behavior. I was feeling uncertain about my own performance and suspected that whatever action the camera captured could only look ridiculous to people not personally involved in the transformation.

Another nagging concern I had was that since both McClenon and I had been involved in instigating this firewalk, it might in some way be less "legitimate" than more spontaneous firewalks or commercial firewalking workshops. The debate about staging and reenacting for documentary production purposes can still raise a fever among producers. Even though this particular performance had been provoked by interest in footage for a documentary, McClenon assured me that we would not move the performance to that next step and pretend to walk over the hot coals. He would soak our stack of wood with real gasoline and light the fire. It would be sincerely hot. Finally, the participants who chose to walk would walk on burning coals, and some could be burned. Everyone would need to address the fire with reverence.

The day before the firewalk, 19 April 1996, we loaded the back of my van with firewood of various sizes and pedigrees and drove for about 45 minutes from Greensboro, North Carolina, to rural Oak Ridge, where we would stage the ritual. The setting for the firewalk was an out-of-the-way estate, loaned to Light and Power Productions for this event. The mise-en-scene appeared ideal--a remote, wooded location. Behind a large house was a separate, one-room building designed for informal meetings and workshops. This building provided a space where firewalk participants would be able to drum, meditate, and eat lunch. There was a deck around the building that over-looked a wooded area where wild dogwoods were in the early stages of splendor. To one side of the building was a small field where we would prepare the bonfire. After McClenon inspected the area for its "fundamental energy," we unloaded the wood from the van and returned to Greensboro.

There would be three phases to the performance of the firewalk: preparation and rehearsal, summoning of the transformation, and the return to a normal state or "social reality."

### **Preparation and Rehearsal**

The preparation stage of the firewalk gives the ritual its initial frame, setting it apart from ordinary life. Ten individuals partook in the ritual: six women and four men, ranging in age from mid-twenties to late-forties. Of the participants, only McClenon had previously firewalked. For some of these participants preparation began the night before at a large social gathering; about half of the participants attended and were able to meet one another. Some of those who came to the evening gathering ultimately decided not to participate in the firewalk the next day. For everyone who would walk, serious preparations began the following morning, when we asked everyone participating to sign two release forms: one for the documentary and one for participation in the firewalk.

Commercial firewalking workshops often stage these events in the early evening for the visual excitement of glowing red coals against a nighttime ambiance. Night is also a period when the socially constructed barriers between individuals and their metaphysical questions are often less evident. However, we decided to hold the firewalking workshop during the day, primarily for scheduling reasons. The result would be less "dramatic" but in ways more technically feasible, given the vast area that would have to be lit for videocamera coverage. At 10:00 A.M., participants gathered to help stack the wood into an oblong pile. The completed chore gave us a stack about five feet wide, ten feet long, and three to four feet deep--a splendid but unruly pile of wood. Then we congregated in the meeting room for the "lecture," where my conspicuous video crew had already set up the camera and additional lights, and wired the room for sound. McClenon arranged the actors into a "tribal" circle. On the floor were meditation cushions, drums, bells, and candles. On the shelves behind us were more candles and a thin trail of trembling, gray smoke from a stick of burning incense. Already the room had taken on an ambiance that was clearly set apart from workaday routine: it was ritual and "show."

An early part of the preparation for transformance is to understand individual motivations. McClenon asked each participant why they had come. For one woman the motive was pain--she hoped to learn ways to use her mind to deal with constant physical pain. Another woman explained her motives more ambiguously: "I try not to turn down any gifts that are offered to me," she said. "I don't know where this will take me, but I'm open to whatever happens." One man had followed his wife to the event, planning to be a spectator along with the video crew, but changed his mind, took off his shoes and socks, and joined the circle. He smiled and shrugged: "It just seems like an opportunity." Another man said that firewalking was something he needed to experience: "Thinking about this [firewalk] I think I motivated it to happen," he said. "I wanted this to happen." I reiterated my desire to record an event that I hoped would add to the documentary McClenon and I were producing. I also expressed my own curiosity about the nature of wondrous performances, which made me want to step out from behind the camera and participate. Around the circle, each participant in turn expressed his or her expectations or reasons for participating in the firewalk. I sensed a great deal of uncertainty in this group, a sort of sheepish awkwardness about this whole lunatic business of walking barefoot over hot coals. Yet, I also sensed an eagerness to put aside safe, social spaces for a spiritual adventure.

After each participant had researched his or her motives, McClenon described in some detail how the performance would evolve. From that moment, he told us there would be no talking, no socializing. Being silent would permit new potentials, augmenting perceptions and tranquilizing the mind. We would drum, meditate, drum some more, follow McClenon on a meditation walk, meditate, and eat a silent lunch.

Though drumming is neither evident in Burkan's firewalking seminars nor a central part, it seems to be a central focus in many New Age rituals. Several researchers suggest that drums synchronize the rhythms of muscular activity centered in the brain and nervous system, making drumming an ideal ritual activity (Chappel 1790; d'Aquile, et al. 1979). We spent most of the morning alternating between drumming and meditation.

When it was time to eat, participants formed a line. Earlier we had instructed the participants to bring a dish to share with the group--a kind of firewalking potluck. The food included tofu chili, fruit, cheese, bread, and salad. McClenon told us to prepare the food early in the day and set it out on the counter ahead of time, buffet style, so we wouldn't have to talk or ask each other questions or make a lot of preparation noises when the time came to eat. Each person picked up a bowl and reverently handed a bowl to the person standing directly behind in the line. This was not part of McClenon's instructions, but a spontaneous observance started by the first person in the line and mimicked by everyone else in a repetitive, highly stylized way, until the handing out of bowls and serving of lunch seemed like an integral part of a familiar ritual. Participants ate lunch in a semi-trancelike state, wandering outside to enjoy the cool morning air and that early phase of spring, when nature seems at its most tender. I remember noticing that everything I ate had intense flavor. I perceived that the others also seemed to be chewing very slowly, as if savoring every bean. Walking barefoot across the lawn, I stepped on a patch of wild onion and felt as if I could smell it through the soles of my feet. Every sensation seemed particularly concentrated. I remember thinking that such potent sensations, though pleasurable for eating and drifting across the lawn to enjoy the scenery, would only make the fire seem hotter.

After lunch the group followed McClenon in a meditation walk out to the fire bed to light the fire. Moments after McClenon doused the wood with kerosene and put a match to it, the bonfire was flaming, the heat intense against my face. This was a sober moment. The fire was definitely burning; it wasn't feigned or simulated. I remember worrying that it might be too hot for the trees that were about 40 feet away. When the fire leapt up above our heads, I worried that the wind might blow it in the direction of those nearest trees. (I fantasized about headlines in the Greensboro News and Record: "Crazed Firewalkers Cause Oak Ridge Wildfire.") We watched the fire silently for a while before returning to the building and resuming our meditation pose. It took a great deal of effort for me not to think about the fire but to concentrate on breathing and meditation. It didn't help that I also worried about my camera crew, who appeared to be having some technical problems. Recorder batteries seemed to need frequent changing, and Matt Barr had some concerns about the VCR, but he solved these problems without too much need to consult me. Although I know the video crew was disruptive at times, the participants in the firewalk appeared to become accustomed to their presence. This ability to ignore the video crew was more difficult for me, since I felt that my first priority was to record the materials necessary for a good documentary. I didn't want to get burned, but my own transformance and experience of the firewalk were secondary considerations. Eventually, we solved equipment problems and I began to concentrate less on the crew and more on the ritual.

The rest of the preparation for the firewalk would follow a set sequence: drumming, meditation, and walking meditation around the fire. McClenon explained that like any stage actor's performance, we would learn our part through rehearsal. "We will always be walking the same way," he explained, indicating that we would follow him in a line out to the fire, always keeping the same positions. In the rehearsals McClenon told us we would walk around the fire, "But once the coals are ready," he said, "we will walk over the fire rather than around it."

The coals are judged to be ready once the large stack of wood has burned down enough that the coals can be raked out into a somewhat even path between 12 and 14 feet long. At this point, the fire is still hot enough to singe the hair on the arms of the person raking out the coals. The temperatures of coal beds vary from one firewalk to the next. McClenon's experiments in Okinawa yielded coal beds with temperatures of more than 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit. His estimates of the Oak Ridge coal bed were that it was less hot, 800-900 degrees Fahrenheit, though still hot enough to blister and burn human skin.

McClenon furnished some veteran's advice for the actual firewalk: walk quickly, smoothly, and evenly down the center of the path. He told us, "I'm not going to tell you that Lord Shiva will protect the bottoms of your feet, that Jesus will save you, or that successful firewalking proves that the Buddha is correct." Some of the participants may have set out to find God or self-empowerment. McClenon wouldn't promise anything, but suggested that we might leave this world for one instant as we walked over hot coals. Quoting from Rumi's poetry, McClenon said we would be forgiven for forgetting that what we really wanted was "love's confusing joy" (Rumi 1995). He reminded us that what we wished for was to be able to love in harmony as a community and indicated that this would happen today as we became a "tribe."

"We will share this love with the people who watch this program," here McClenon indicated the videocamera. We will "share the inferences and suggestions, creating a bond between us. We can develop love within us and know that love is contagious. The people watching us will see that the mind and the heart can do this [walk on fire]," he said. However, until the moment of the firewalk, which would not take place until about three o'clock that afternoon, we would prepare and rehearse. We would have to "wade through the mud before we could walk on the fire," McClenon told us. By this I supposed he meant that authentic transformation takes a great deal of practice.

## **Transformance**

The ritual elements necessary to conjure up transformation vary from director to director, shaman to shaman, and performer to performer. Each individual experiments with ritual elements, altering them until she discovers a method that works. The elements may include a variety or combination of chanting, praying, singing, meditating, drumming, dancing, and other patterned movements. McClenon believes the key to transformance

is hypnotic suggestibility. Those who respond to hypnotic suggestion are more likely to experience tertiary wondrous events. McClenon submits that hypnotic suggestibility is not a defect of the weak-minded, but a powerful, useful tool, one that may have played an important role in human survival. Hypnotic suggestibility is useful for avoiding injury, healing the body, and reducing pain--all important in the skill to adapt to and outlive various grievous or risky situations. McClenon recommended that firewalk participants call upon hypnotic suggestibility. "Turn on that ability now," he said. Participants then began to work on creating hypnotic trance.

McClenon asked members of our tribe to close their eyes and concentrate on breathing, to take note of the surroundings, but to return focus to the breath. The technique for this hypnosis was very similar to the technique McClenon used in his pain reduction clinic at Hershey Medical Center. In 1994 in the early stages of research, I had videotaped McClenon in a session in which chronic pain patients found relief through hypnotic suggestion. I learned that this technique isn't effective for everybody, but provided tremendous comfort for those patients with dissociative ability. Portions of the firewalking hypnosis also reminded me of techniques learned in Lamaze training, in which the concentration of focus is on the breath and breathing in order to induce a relaxed trance state to reduce childbirth pain. The supposition is that repetition, concentration, and rhythm provoke a condition which stimulates the brain into releasing endorphins directly into the bloodstream, relieving pain. My own experience with Lamaze classes was not very successful for achieving pain reduction, even though they were highly informative about the process of childbirth. I believe the problem was an inability on the part of many couples, husbands in particular, to take this dissociative training earnestly. Even though my husband and I attempted to be serious, it was very difficult in that particular class. It may be that my dissociative abilities are limited. McClenon reported that his own inability to achieve trance analgesia limited his performance as a firewalker. Firewalkers at Kataragama in Sri Lanka acclaimed McClenon a "swami" because he was the first Westerner to cross the coals successfully. However, McClenon discovered more than an hour after the ceremony that he had been badly burned (see McClenon 1994:115-27). McClenon told me that either he had a limited ability to achieve trance analgesia or else the fires just "burn a whole lot hotter in Sri Lanka."

A test of hypnotic suggestibility followed several minutes of this narcotic meditation. With our eyes closed, McClenon asked us to hold our arms out straight in front of us, then implied that one arm might feel heavy, while the other might seem much lighter. He invited us to open our eyes to witness the varying degrees of hypnotic suggestibility within our tribe. Three women in the group appeared to be the most open to suggestion, showing the greatest dissociative skill. For each of these women the "heavy" and "light" arms were more than a foot apart. In one instance the hypnotic suggestion made as much as a three foot difference. These women would become our "shamans" for the firewalk. The rest of the tribe would witness while these women experienced "magical flight." We would get inspiration from their performance, which we would later be able to apply to our own.

Magical flight is one type of wondrous performance a shaman may undertake to inspire belief and transformation within the tribe. Other examples of wondrous performances include displays of extrasensory perception (magic knowledge), pain immunity (such as resistance to the effects of heat, wounds, or poisonous snake bites), and magical healing. All of these performances are usually accompanied by a state of trance or self-hypnosis.

McClenon invited the women into a deeper trance state, using suggestion and chimes. I noticed that even though McClenon asked the rest of the tribe to watch at this point, those who weren't shamans also appeared to be in trance. I found my own body responding somewhat to suggestions McClenon gave to our shamans. Though the shamans' eyes were closed and mine were open, I could feel the muscles in my body answering the cue to relax, becoming limp and malleable. Usually sitting on the floor without back support for extended periods of time creates extreme discomfort for me. However, though I sat on the floor for a large part of the morning and afternoon, I don't remember being aware of any irritation or pain.

Once the three women were deep into an enraptured state, they performed a kind of "improvisation," in which they selected new personalities, new histories, and new names. Erving Goffman comments that a trance state allows the possessed one to carry out ritual objectives and expectations of the community (1959:74). The same was most likely true for our firewalk. Before going into the deepest stage of hypnosis, McClenon asked the three women to choose new names for their roles as our shamans. The women decided they would become "Silver," "Air," and "Phoenix." These names seemed self-consciously chosen by our shamans for their exotic or dramatic qualities. Apparently shamans don't have names like Edna, Sally, or Beverly. Particularly interesting was the choice of the name Phoenix, a mythological bird which ignited its own nest and burned itself in order to emerge from the fire rejuvenated. These exotic choices may stem from the belief--as old as language--that words and names are powerful, commanding, and persuasive. The individuals choosing the shamanic names probably selected them because the names suggested important properties: Silver for beauty and Air as another elemental force that feeds the fire. McClenon wrote the new names on a scratch pad and from that point on referred to the women by these names, suggesting they would forget their old personalities entirely until they emerged from the hypnotic trance. McClenon proposed that these three women would become our spiritual leaders, showing us how to walk across the fire, even though none of the women had ever firewalked before.

Researchers theorize that hypnotic suggestibility is a psychological variable that predisposes some individuals to becoming shamans or priests (see Pekala, Kumar, and Cummings 1992: 135-50). In traditional societies a shaman is chosen because of powerful dreams, visions, or even sickness that she cannot control. The future shaman may initially resist the summons to this role, but will finally submit and find a teacher or techniques to help her master these powerful impulses.(6) In the instance of this contemporary firewalk, the visions arose through hypnotic suggestion. Like the traditional shaman, the three women did not volunteer or seek out their status. At first Air was extremely reluctant to take on the duties of a shaman. She didn't like being the center of our attention and expressed some hesitancy about being videotaped in this role. Finally, she convinced herself to perform and became the most assuring and eloquent of the three women in this role.

Slowly, the tribe began to get a mental portrait of our new shamans as, under hypnosis, they projected new identities. They were benevolent hermits who communed with nature. McClenon suggested that the women might live in the woods. From that suggestion, Air was able to describe her home among the trees and how she lived there alone. She seemed convinced that she really was Air, a priestess who lived in a secluded forest. In this state, she had completely transformed and could not remember her real name or address. McClenon asked her if she remembered signing a release form. Air could not remember the name she wrote, though she remembered signing the form.

Next the shamans underwent a magical flight. Air described the sensations of wind against her skin and the intoxication of rising up into the clouds and feeling tendrils of mist caress her face. She raised a limp hand and brushed the fingers across her cheek. As she described her flight, her eyes were still closed and she had the look of someone filled with rapture. Even though we could all see that Air was with us in the room, sitting barefoot and cross-legged on the floor, the expression on her face was heartfelt. I had no doubt that mentally, at least, she was flying. Silver and Phoenix were less descriptive, but also seemed to experience a blissful flight. Silver smiled placidly as she explained how she slipped into the ether. Phoenix told us that she floated and drifted in and out of alternate dimensions. Each flight appeared to have unique conditions. Similar to the experience of the actor in performance, there was a strange fragility in the shamans' magical flight, physically fictive but authentic in another sense. What happened in each shaman's magical flight clearly was not actual flight and may not have been a true out-of-body situation or spiritual voyage, but the sincerity of the shamans was moving. I'm aware that sincerity can be acted; however, I don't think it was in this instance. The shamans seemed to genuinely believe that the flight they described was "real."

During this magical flight, McClenon asked our shamans to contact the spirits and consult them about the outcome of our firewalk. Silver, Air, and Phoenix then became intermediaries for the rest of us. Although none of the shamans claimed to see spirits or were able to describe the semblance of any apparition, each shaman was emphatic that she felt the presence of spirits and heard their voices. Air assured the tribe that this firewalk had

the approval of all the spirits that spoke to her. Through Air, the spirits attempted to assure us that no one would be burned or blistered. Silver and Phoenix also confirmed that the supernatural world blessed and favored all the members of our Oak Ridge tribe. For this "performance" to be useful for the rest of us, we had to suspend our disbelief and on some level accept the authenticity of the magical flight and pledges that our firewalk had the approval of the spirits. This was one reason why McClenon directed the performance through hypnosis. The theory is that the performance of the shamans would reassure the rest of us and motivate our own transformance. It is comforting to know that a member of the tribe is able to see what is both hidden and invisible to the rest and bring direct and reliable information from the supernatural world (see Eliade 1974).

Witnessing the shamans' spiritual flight was the last step toward the climax of transformation. By this time we had all rehearsed the moment of the firewalk during a meditation walk, when we followed McClenon to the site of the fire, formed a circle, and looked into each other's eyes. Giving McClenon a nonverbal affirmation of readiness, the circle again became a line as we followed McClenon toward the fire, then along one side of it. Before the last two meditation walks, McClenon left the drumming circle to check the fire. The fire had burned down enough that McClenon and an assistant chosen from the group could take out a path of coals about 14 feet long. Big pieces of wood that were still flaming were moved to the edges of the path, creating a fiery border. When McClenon and his assistant returned to the drumming circle, I remember thinking that this time we would walk on the fire. However, even though the path was ready, McClenon led us around rather than over the coals. I could see how red they were, most still flaming. I could feel the heat and see the distortions created by waves of heat and smoke, yet I was strangely disappointed that we did not attempt the walk. We followed him back to the meditation room for another cycle of meditation and drumming. Again, McClenon left the drumming circle. When he returned he said, "Don't let the top layer of ashes fool you. The fire is very hot. Walk quickly and evenly. Don't stop." He offered no words of reassurance, no blessings from the spirits--only a warning. My readiness to walk over hot coals deflated somewhat, but the rest of the tribe solemnly stood and followed McClenon out to the fire bed on that last meditation walk.

Everything went just as we had rehearsed it. We formed a circle, looked into each other's eyes, and nodded readiness. McClenon moved out of the circle and strode toward the fire bed, with the rest of us creating a line behind him. He halted only briefly before he walked across the coals, then turned and gestured for the rest of us to follow. Here the pattern changed from our rehearsal. Without discussion, the tribe's three shamans broke their places in line to follow McClenon across the fire bed. The rest of us trailed after them. I know this, not because I paid attention to it at the time of the walk, but because I noticed it while reviewing the videotape of the event. The shamans had promised to lead us across the coals, even though in our rehearsals they had not been positioned directly behind McClenon in the line. In the videotape they did not. hesitate to move to the head of the line and lead the rest of the tribe.

Everyone walked, taking between five to seven steps to cross the bed. I was last in line. When I entered the path of coals, I felt no heat, only a brittle sensation as the coals cracked under my feet. The path was a mixture of hot coals, ashes, and flaming embers, yet it felt as if someone had sprinkled the ground with several layers of potato chips. I walked slowly and carefully, more concerned about tripping and falling in the uneven path than blistering the skin on my feet. In the days before the firewalk, McClenon had told me plenty of horror stories about people who burned to death when they fell down in a coal bed. However, as I walked, I don't remember being afraid, but I do remember a calm curiosity, marveling that I was walking across the fire without pain. Somewhere in the frontier of my mind a strident, skeptical voice wondered about the scientific explanation. Could there be such a thing as a cold fire? Did McClenon do something to the coals to create poor thermal conductivity? I ignored this voice as much as possible, realizing this voice was not useful to me now. Those little private statements of doubt were distracting my ability to enjoy the wonder of walking on fire.

## **RESTORATION**

Once across the fire bed, members of the Oak Ridge firewalk hugged one another and let out exuberant shouts. No one appeared to have been burned. I inspected my own feet for damage. Though they looked sooty and the skin underneath the soot was whitish, there was no blistering. A couple of people expressed an interest in



walking again. Unlike Tolly Burkan or Ken Cadigan, who encourage members of firewalking workshops to dance or walk through the fire as often as they feel moved to do so, McClenon asked us not to try a second walk across the coals. "Each subsequent walk causes trauma to the feet and increases the risks of burns," McClenon said. "No one has ever been burned on a firewalk that I conducted. I don't want to spoil my record." He did let us go back to the bed and examine it. I held my hand over the path I had just walked across. It was still hot enough to cook hamburgers.

McClenon turned on a hose nearby and flooded the fire. Like a drawn curtain, this was the signal that the drama was over. Around the soaked firewood, the members of the tribe talked excitedly, reliving the experience. The aftereffect of the ritual was powerful and bonding. However, routines of ordinary life soon returned. Everyday socializing and cleaning up of the yard quickly replaced the ritual and spectacle of our firewalking ceremony. We needed to pick up the larger pieces of firewood that didn't burn down to coals and ashes, shovel up coals, and generally try to restore the site, as much as possible, to its original condition. Some of the participants had returned to the building to clean up the remains of lunch and rearrange the furniture, which we had moved to accommodate our drumming and meditation circle. I was again part of a production team, packing up equipment and spot-checking tapes.

Just as we finished loading my van with video equipment, a sudden storm developed, bringing wind, thunder, lightning, and a heavy downpour of rain. My focus had been so inward that I hadn't noticed the darkening sky and was surprised by the big drops of rain. The storm seemed a fitting end: the exclamation point at the close of an emotional ritual. As McClenon and I drove back to Greensboro in the rain, he assured me that the fire had been real. We both noted a light tingling sensation on the bottoms of our feet. By the next day, the sensation was gone.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Firewalking as "Mutual Pretense"***

The concept of mutual pretense is useful for explaining how a contemporary American group can initially cope with a concept as foreign as this firewalking drama and the ceremonies surrounding it. The "drama of mutual pretense" is a ritual in which participants agree to, if not believe, then at least pretend to believe in a consensual fiction (see Glaser and Straus 1976). In mutual pretense, participants create a drama in which everyone agrees to play a serious role. All parties consent to act properly to maintain the illusion. The prime example Barney Glaser and Anselm Straus use as an illustration of this concept is the instance in a hospital setting, where both patient and staff know the patient is dying, but pretend otherwise. The rationale for the pretense is that both patient and nursing staff function better when shielded by this fiction that the patient will survive and recover. This mutual pretense can help family members avoid overwhelming grief and protects hospital staff from such scenes. That this ritual is necessarily and routinely enacted is an indication of the fear and tension that Americans tend to exhibit when faced with death. A more playful example of mutual pretense occurs in the meetings of the Society for Creative Anachronisms (SCA), where members develop new names, new personal narratives, new customs, and wear costumes inventively adapted from their understanding of a historical period. During meetings all members agree to become these characters and respond to one another according to the rules of this fictional culture, addressing one another as if they truly are the characters they portray. SCA members can live within this fiction for a Weekend, an entire week, or longer.

In our firewalking event, mutual pretense softened the early moments of the ritual, helping strangers form a kinship and partake in an exotic ceremony. Afterward, some participants admitted feeling silly sitting barefoot and cross-legged on the floor but knew they needed to be serious about the drumming and other firewalking preparations. Mutual pretense helped us set aside the usual cues and conventions of daily life to become a tribe and achieve a trance state. All of the adults participating in the Oak Ridge firewalk understood that fire burns human flesh but chose to ignore that fact. Some of the participants may have believed that there was a scientific explanation, such as the Leidenfrost effect, for why their feet were protected. Even if there was private doubt about the magic involved in firewalking, everyone earnestly took part in a New Age ceremony that affirmed mystical realms, charitable spirits, and the potential of human beings to transcend the physical world.

Participants implicitly agreed to the pretense that three ordinary women could become shamans and share a spiritual journey that would help protect the rest of us from harm. Members of the firewalk suspended their disbelief, accepting the drama and enjoying the transformation it helped create.

The disciples of New Age movements are generally adults, well-educated, white, urban, upper-middle-class, and middle-aged. In a world still clinging to commercial and linear patterns for life's narratives, these New Age audiences hunger for transformation and bonding within small groups. Decades of passive spectatorship have whetted their appetites for active and personal transformation, creating movements away from orthodoxy or at least supplementing the spiritual experiences of mainstream religious establishments with rituals replicating those performed by tribal communities. The people drawn to contemporary rituals crave a concentrated, emotional interaction with others. They yearn to become a "tribe," a family. The result is a renaissance of options, as alternate religious groups enrich the spiritual landscape.

The firewalking ritual I experienced celebrated the New Age vision of a sacred world that is benign. This spiritual world reflects the physical environment of the white American middle-class "seekers" who often participate in New Age practices. Their spiritual world is forgiving, well-intentioned, and generally comfortable. The spirits are not all powerful, but kindly. Though religious practices of Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian, and Native American groups have trance rituals similar to those of New Age congregations, these constituencies are generally less affluent and more marginalized. Their rituals respect gods that are sometimes aloof, capricious, even cruel. However, belief in the right gods, even in benevolent New Age spirits, won't necessarily protect the feet of the firewalker. Sometimes believers get burned. To sustain the drama, firewalkers provide rationales for the blistering and burning of the faithful. In some cultures, blisters and burns are signs of a god's punishment. The New Age account is less harsh. If faith protected biblical figures such as Meschach, Shadrach, and Abednego, but not a contemporary firewalker, the New Age explanation is that blistering and burning areas on the feet supposedly correspond to parts of the body that are diseased or need medical treatment. By blistering or burning, the spirits communicate an important message to the firewalker about her physical or spiritual health. The middle-class American constituency for a New Age ritual takes an exotic, dangerous, and potentially painful ceremony like firewalking and uses it to demonstrate equality (ordinary people can do it) and a benevolent spiritual world (even serious burns are meant to be helpful).

Dramas of mutual pretense are fragile ones--carefully constructed illusions that can easily be shattered. This explains why the presence of skeptics inhibits manifestations of wondrous events and damages the shaman's ability to achieve wondrous performance. Chuckling at the shamans' behavior, snickering at a group of barefoot adults seriously beating away on drums, heckling the participants, or questioning the illusion would have broken the spell and inhibited transformation. Each of the actors in the ritual must agree to the mutual pretense or the drama collapses. This clarifies why psychics do not perform well for James Randi, the magician who has made it his business to expose the fraud behind wondrous performance. Randi does not play freely at mutual pretense. His role is to shatter the fiction and debunk the show.

The firewalking drama reinforces a fiction many contemporary Americans desperately need, just as the dying patient may have an intense need to imagine that she will live. The mutual make-believe between a dying patient and the hospital staff helps create an illusion that inspires hope or keeps agonized questions at a distance. In the drama of firewalking, participants agree that human beings are not limited by the physical world, by the confines of their bodies or the earthly laws of time and space. The firewalking drama inspires faith and wonderment. The Leidenfrost effect, poor thermal conductivity, or some other such explanation may account for the absence of burns or blisters on the feet of firewalkers, but the human need for transformation accounts for the elation experienced and the joy participants take away with them. Though wondrous performances such as firewalking may be achieved in part through mutual pretense, there is true power in the certainty of our imaginative activities, our ability to transform belief into action and know at least on an emotional level that our beliefs are valid. Imagination is the shaman.

## Notes

(1.) It is difficult to define the parameters of the New Age Movement largely because it has no clear set of doctrines or manifest belief system. The movement accommodates contradictory ideas and practices. The New Age movement acknowledges one universal religion which assumes many distinct forms and draws practices from any religious tradition it chooses. New Agers believe that the same cosmic forces penetrate all religions. Typical of the New Age movement are practices of meditation and various transformative exercises taught by different gurus or spiritual teachers. By the 1990S the New Age movement no longer seemed to be a cult or fringe phenomenon, but had assimilated various facets of the movement into mainstream culture. There continues to be some backlash to New Age ideas, however. Skeptics have devoted considerable energy to ridiculing New Age beliefs and "psychic flim-flam." For example, Martin Gardner's book, *The New Age: Notes or a Fringe Watcher* (1988), joyfully razzes New Age customs. The backlash is also evident in popular media. Wilson, the eccentric next-door neighbor on *Home Improvement* firewalks alone in his backyard while giving advice to a befuddled Tim Taylor ("Wilson Directs School Play," ABC, 30 April 1996). Other New Age practices such as spiritual cleansing through sweat lodge rituals or beliefs in astrology provide humorous moments for characters in *Cybil* (CBS, 6 May 1996). Some observers believe the energy of New Age has faded in the 1990s due in part to this kind of ridicule in secular media. However, millions continue to participate in the various practices and evolve new ones as the millennium approaches. The influence of the New Age movement will most likely remain for an indefinite future.

(2.) Tom Margrave has a description of contemporary firewalking and firewalking events on the World Wide Web (Margrave 1996).

(3.) In New Age philosophy, the sadhana is the spiritual course of continual transformation that a person will experience. Some individuals will sample a variety of transformative exercises, taking specific rituals from first one religion, then replacing these with practices from another, forming a very individualized and perpetually changing sacred path. The goal of continual transformation might best be understood by a professional actress, who must learn to step outside herself to advance her career as well as her life path. Interestingly, a major voice for the New Age movement was actress Shirley MacLaine.

(4.) The Leidenfrost effect occurs when something cool and damp makes contact with something hot and dry. Water vaporizes, blocking contact between the foot and the hot coals with a barrier of steam. For scientific explanations see Price 1936 and Walker 1991.

(5.) *Wondrous Healing* is a sequel to *Wondrous Events: Foundations of Folk Belief* an hour-long documentary I produced and directed in association with Jim McClenon. The Southern Educational Communications Association (SECA) distributed *Wondrous Events* to public television in 1994. The program is also distributed to universities and libraries through Penn State University Media, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1-800-826-0132. With regard to *Wondrous Healing*, readers might like to know that at this writing it is nearing final stages of off-line editing. I have so much material on firewalking, however, that I am considering making a separate show on that subject.

(6.) It is interesting to note here Richard Schechner's comment that becoming an artist in the West is similar to learning to be a shaman (1985:237-38).

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