



Remembering Miriam who danced, De Sola danced in the Sinai Desert with the Bedouin guides of the pilgrimage group from St. George's [Anglican] College in Jerusalem, 1990. (De Sola collection)

20. Two Months in the Holy Land, St. George's Anglican Cathedral, Jerusalem

CDS: While I was in residence at St. John the Divine, my husband and I had the opportunity to go to Jerusalem for eight weeks, staying as guests of St. George's [Anglican] Cathedral, near the Old City. The agreement was that I would help the staff who were in charge of the pilgrims who came every two weeks by leading them in dance at the various places that we would visit. There was a lecture each day beforehand to acquaint us with the background of that day's historical site that we would visit, but I had no other preparation! In spite of my fears, it was an amazing experience, and I came away with great memories and a "feel" for rituals that developed over time in the church [as well as for] the physical settings of so many passages from scripture. As I said, I was expected to create dances at the sites. One the trips we took was to Bethlehem, where we visited the Church of the Nativity. I pretended it was Christmas Eve, and prepared the children who were there with their parents to perform a dance in the church. I recall we circled around the altar, after processing with candles. It is a lovely memory. I still choreograph dances with candles and processions on Christmas Eve. The highlight of my trip was when we all went to the Sinai Desert with Bedouins as our guides. (A digression: When I came to Jerusalem, I was secretly looking for Miriam, Moses's sister in the Hebrew scriptures. I was looking for modern-day Miriams—perhaps in the streets. Where was Miriam? I identified with Miriam for she danced and led her people in dance. There is much mention of dance in the scriptures, but few whose names we know who are identified with dance. I can only think of King David and Miriam—Miriam who led the Israelites through the Red Sea, dancing with her tambourines.) So we were led into the desert, staying overnight with the Bedouins. The next day with a lot of shale [that lay loosely on the sand] in the desert, the idea was to build an altar in the wilderness. And I was to lead a few people ahead of time to create the altar as the other people moved more slowly out into the desert. As I led them, I became Miriam, dancing as the Spirit led, not through [the] Red Sea, but into this mysterious desert.

In the desert, there is a sense of presence and holiness—and the unexpected. I remember when out of nowhere suddenly a camel appeared [on] the horizon. Where did it come from? And, as I said, the Bedouins were leading us. I remember a funny incident. We were in the midst of sand dunes. The Bedouins made up a game challenging us (perhaps twenty pilgrims) as to who could run down the sand dunes most creatively, I started jumping and dancing down the sand dunes and won the prize. It was a bottle of wine. There was a party at night with the usual tea made over a fire, but I also had wine, and my husband began passing it around. The Bedouins called out, "Who wants to dance? Who wants to dance? We'll teach you to dance." Nobody got up but me. Of course, I wanted to dance! So the Bedouins had me hold my hands across my face like I was covered, wearing a veil. And then they taught me the movements for my feet and body. I had the time of my life. I loved it! And then some other women started to dance with me, for which I was very grateful. It was so much fun sharing—bypassing such seemingly big cultural differences. How could I imagine I would be dancing with the Bedouins in the desert?! I also danced at the Church of the Beatitudes, and many, many [other] places. I recall a ledge we stood on, looking into a valley where David lamented the loss of Absalom. We walked the road where followers of Jesus laid down their palm branches, which I have incorporated in dances on Palm Sunday, I recall the fascination of watching Ethiopian Christians wash their feet on the roof of the [Church of the] Holy Sepulchre, sharing containers with water. The Dean of St. George's College had urged us to stay over Holy Week, to take in the many rituals which started in Jerusalem. And so we did. I could talk on and on.

Often, De Sola explores healing in her dance classes and in ritual. She has shared in “Care Through Touch” workshops. Frequently, she and her dancers have taken part in services remembering victims of AIDS: for example, on December 5, 1993, at Pacific School of Religion in a service called “For the Healing of the Nations,” and on December 1, 1996, at B’nai Tikvah for “World AIDS Day.”

February 15-18, 1996, the Association of Christian Therapists held their annual conference in San Diego which was called, “Encountering God: the Mystery of Grace.” Father Marty Jenco, OSM, was the keynote speaker. In 1985 when serving as director of Catholic Relief Services in Beirut he was abducted by Shiite Muslim extremist. He was released after 19 months. He wrote *Bound to Forgive* in 1995, describing his experiences with the “Gentle God” and echoes Jesus words at the crucifixion: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Also Jim Wallis, a leader of *Sojourners* magazine and Sue Monk Kidd, the founder of CHILDHELP USA, one of the largest child abuse nonprofit organizations in the field of prevention, treatment and research. Ads for the conference said, “With us for the first time the Carla De Sola, respected artist in the field and liturgical dancer who will guide us in the experience of Taize prayer.” After the conference, the program chairperson wrote to De Sola, “You were an inspiration and you most certainly further to the healing process in our acceptance of our bodies. We received many wonderful responses to your presentation and to your style of prayer and sacred movement. If you have been a blessing.”