Chris Clarke. 22.02.1946 – 16.04.2019

Circle dance was only one part of Chris’s life; he was a physicist, a philosopher, a writer, a mystic, an activist – I could go on. But Chris recognized the potential of circle dance to embody central ideas: of connection; of a potential of being beyond the busy thinking mind that could be accessed individually or, as in the case of circle dance, collectively, and the vital importance of this potential for creativity, growth and ultimately, survival at a time of existential threat.

So, circle dance was important for Chris. As a founder member of the Creation Spirituality, which then became Greenspirit, organization in the late 1980s onwards, he used circle dance in rituals of healing for the earth and galvanizing of the community towards restorative action. In 1993 he led a couple of hundred protestors in three dances in the terrible scar in the sacred hillside of Twyford Down which has become part of the M3 between Winchester and London. Introducing Kore, he alluded to the story of Persephone in the underworld, saying: ‘We are in the underworld’.

Between 2010 and 2015 he led the Wickham circle dance group, and during and before that time Chris had tried his hand at choreographing dances. I am going to introduce three that embodied his passion for both knowledge, justice and change. ‘At the window’ uses a lesser known song from Leonard Cohen about the human condition, described as ‘tangle of matter and ghost’. It expresses incompleteness, brokenness: the word made flesh is ‘a stutter’, but also glory and potential: ‘darling of ages, demons and saints; gentle this soul’. In the choreography there is a tangly movement for that line, and a passing touching hands and meeting eyes for ‘gentle this soul’. It is powerful.

The second uses a song by the Albion Band called ‘Head Smashed in Buffalo Jump’. This is a challenging song about the way in which our culture has destroyed the ancient culture of the indigenous American peoples and reduced them to addiction and destitution. It is an ambitious choreography, combining elements of barn dance with the circle dance and drawing on Chris’s study of the Ghost Dances, that expressed the millennial despair of the defeated native Americans in the late 19th Century.

The third is set to Joni Mitchell’s song, Woodstock (though not her version). This is about setting out from tight constraints to found a new society, with the vision that ‘We are stardust’ – our bodies contain particles from the earliest moments of the universe – to inspire and give courage for the daunting enterprise of turning things around.

These magnificent and deeply meaningful dances looked as if they would die the death when Chris’s Alzheimer’s finished his dance leading in 2015. However, Plaxy Muetzel revived them for the celebration of Chris’s life and creativity that was planned to take place while he was still alive. He participated in the planning, but sadly died before the event. Plaxy and I hope to enable some sort of event where these dances and ideas can be again brought to life. We need this vision in our time of crisis, and also, they are thoroughly enjoyable, if challenging, dances.

Isabel Clarke