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Raindancer

Granger pulled into the driveway in his red and white pickup, and Jason walked out from the house. Granger rolled his window down, but he left the engine and the air-conditioner running. He said, "The corn is dry down on the end by the road."

Jason said, "I can't get water down that far. There isn't enough water in the ditch."

"Figured that was the problem. Can't run it down the field if you don't have it. We sure do need some rain."

Neither of them said anything for about a minute. Then Granger said, "We'll be gone five or six days for the wedding. Do the best you can with what water you have."

"Want me to do a rain dance?"

Granger laughed, "Sure. Do a rain dance."

After Granger left, Jason couldn't get it out of his mind. He knew Hopi danced for rain. They believed man is an integral part of a complex, spiritually-driven universe. If any part doesn't function correctly, the entire universe will be out of balance. Man is responsible to maintain the complex structures of ritual that give recognition, reinforcement, and reverence to the creator, to all life, and to the complex forces that knit the universe together in harmony.

The Hopi didn't dance for rain. They danced to fulfill man's function, reverent performer of rituals in a harmonious universe. In a harmonious universe, rain comes as it is needed.

Jason thought he would be unbearably presumptuous to think that he, acting alone, could fulfill that function. Then he thought, he didn't know what he could or couldn't do. He did know he could define himself into total impotence by accepting what we think we know. What about Black Elk? Neihardt wrote that Black Elk, Sioux, raised a rain and thunder storm for him and other witnesses.

Hopi, Sioux, all the tribes, fulfilled their function as man in harmony with the earth for over fifteen thousand years.

So he danced. Down between the corn rows in the dust-dry soil, soft under his bare feet. He stepped slowly and softly this way and that, into the next row, down it, across two more rows, corn stalks taller than he was. He didn't know what to do. He was too conscious of what he didn't know. He felt clumsy and grinned apologetically to the corn stalks and to God. He didn't want to be a Hollywood Indian. He was not an Indian. He was a man alone before God, asking for rain, asking for harmony in this place, in this time.

He danced a dance like the sandhill cranes dance. He walked up and down the corn rows in the stately crane walk, knowing the creator of the universe still drives it in perfect harmony. He was a bear, down in the dust in a wallow, a bison in a dust wallow, a ground squirrel inventorying corn, a grouse, a crow, dancing,

running, flying, all of them knowing the creator of the universe still drives it in perfect harmony.

He was a man. Alone before God. Reaching for harmony.

He didn't know the rituals or the dances. All he had was trying to resonate in harmony with God, with the universe in harmony, in this moment fulfilling the potential, the responsibility the creator of the universe gave man.

He had no sense of time passing. He forgot the purpose of his activities. He found himself deep in reverence and gratitude for life, for all of life, for the life force.

The sun set. Clouds came over the mountains, gathered dark above the valley, and it rained. Jason knelt in the dust that quickly became mud.

Rain poured down on him, and he felt cold. He laughed. He stood up and started toward the house. Mud caked up on his feet, thicker and thicker. He laughed again and said, "Elephant's feet. I got elephant's feet." He walked through the mud like an elephant. He scraped mud off his feet at the door and went in and listened to the hard rain on the roof.

When Granger came back, the days had become hot again. They talked of a few things. Granger said, "That rain sure put things in shape."

"I danced for it." Granger looked at him. "Don't you remember? You said dance for rain, so I danced for rain, and it poured down."

Granger looked at him and laughed.

Then Jason laughed. He wasn't laughing away anything that had happened. He laughed because he realized the prevailing beliefs are narrow and self-protective. He'd let those beliefs slip away in the cornfield, through the rainstorm, through the days following, because he was alone, without the influence of anyone else's ideas. Granger put the dance into perspective.

Once or twice, when conversations touched on unusual experiences, Jason mentioned dancing in the corn that day, but mostly, he didn't talk about it. He did what he thought of as backing up in his thoughts. Probably it would have rained even if he hadn't danced and prayed in the cornfield. Probably.

Years later, a hot, dry, dusty summer. Lightning set fires in the forests. Marshes started to dry up. Grass that could have fed wildlife and cattle crisped brown and brittle in the sun. Smoke hung heavy in the valley.

Jason felt nervous and irritable. The unnatural dryness became outlaw electricity to him. Everything metal he touched shocked him. He got shocked when he touched other people. They felt it too, but it didn't jolt them, almost knock them off their feet, the way it did Jason.

The 4th of July was hot even before the sun came up. Jason's wife turned in bed to see if he was awake. She said, "Can you imagine the parade downtown in this heat, with crowds of people?"

"We're committed to it. We promised the girls we'd go. Besides that, it's the perfect place to dance for rain."

Jason wasn't a highly public person. He was almost formal, a little reserved. Yet, he walked into the street in the middle of the parade. He put on his bright yellow rain pants, then the yellow jacket and the hat with a close brim over his face and a long brim over the back of his neck. He danced and spun down the street, and people laughed at him. He told them, "It's going to rain."

It was 108 degrees. Sweat poured off him in his airless rainclothes.

Spectators wished they could believe. His daughters believed without question. His wife was embarrassed.

Jason wondered if he would pass out from the heat. He wondered if he was a fool.

Clouds rolled in from the coast range, and it began to rain, then harder. People laughed, cheered, shouted and danced in the street. At first, before they had time to think it over, Jason saw the people's gratitude for rain flowing upward as rain poured down.

He walked home in the pouring rain with his wife and daughters. He put the rain coat on his oldest daughter and the rain hat on his youngest daughter and carried the pants rolled up under his arm. He loved getting soaking wet. He took his wife's hand and didn't get shocked. He laughed.

Coincidence, the people would say, if they thought about it at all, and he agreed. Coincidence is when two or more events coincide, and there is always meaning in their coincidence. Nothing is by chance.

Some mornings, Jason went to the restaurant near the freeway for coffee. Granger and some of his farming friends gathered there for coffee before starting their day's work. Jason liked to keep up old contacts, hear how the world and their work in it looked to that group of men.

The morning after the rain stopped, Jason went in for coffee. Everyone talked about the rain. As soon as Jason sat down, Mike spoke to him. "Granger says you danced for the rain. He says you do that. He says you're a rain dancer." Jason looked at Granger, and Granger grinned at him.

"If I danced for rain?"

"I don't know. I'd have about half a mind to kick the shit out of you, if you danced for rain and if that caused the rain, if I believed that."

"What? Wasn't it good to have that rain? Didn't we need rain?"

"I didn't. Not me. Hell no. I had 6000 dollars worth of hay cut, and that rain ruined it. It's not worth baling now."

Granger put his hand on Mike's shoulder. "It's got to rain some time. I guess somebody's going to lose some way every time it rains, but we still have to have rain."

Mike said, "Well, this is stupid, anyway. Dance for rain all you want. I don't believe in that B.S. in the first place. Anybody who does is some kind of retard, and my mother taught me not to pick on retards, so I guess you're safe if you're a rain dancer or not a rain dancer."

Jason sorted carefully through what he might say, but Granger said, "Jason, why don't you come out and drive tractor a couple of weeks for me, just so you don't forget how?" and Tony asked Red about his new tractor, and the subject was gone. Jason drank black coffee and tried to figure out all the ways anyone could get hurt by rain.

Jason transferred to a southern Oregon branch that was in shaky condition. He took the operation apart and started putting it back together in more effective patterns.

Jason and his family put a music group together. They took some engagements. Sometimes they performed at churches.

Snow melted in the spring in southern Oregon mountains, but spring rains never came. Nor did any summer rain. Hay dried brown and gold without making full growth. The rivers ran low. Springs and small creeks dried up. Jason felt the drying out of the earth more acutely than he could speak of. He prayed for rain.

His daughter came to him in the afternoon. Anna said, "Dad, dance for rain."

Smoke lay heavy above the mountains, where fire ate the forest.

Jason was startled. "I didn't know you remembered that. Do we believe in that? Don't we work through prayer?"

"Yes. Is prayer thoughts and words and nothing beyond that? Music can be prayer. Dance can be prayer. Anything we do can become prayer."

Somehow, he realized, he had come to believe he was of this

apparent world. He had buried some of the meaning of his experience, because it seemed to have no context in the contemporary world. Some of what he was had slipped away from him.

He thought, me? Just me? Why me?

That evening, they had what he called "one of our secular engagements," in the park, low emphasis on religious music, heavier emphasis on entertainment, popular music, popular forms. No admission fee, no pay for the musicians.

When they were working well together and Jason thought they had the audience in their pockets, he sang out, "Do we need rain?"

Some in the audience responded, "Yes."

He and his guitar sang it again, louder, "Do we need rain?"

More voices, "Yes."

Some wavering in the audience. This might not be what they came for.

"Do we need rain?"

"Yes." They were more sure.

"Then let's make rain."

Some attentions scattered. A man over by the oak trees boomed in a deep voice, "How do we make rain?"

"Here's how we make rain." He built a rising structure with his guitar, and he sang, "Thank you God, for the rain you are bringing us."

Bell-like, his wife and daughters sang it in three-part harmony

right after him, as smoothly as if they had rehearsed it. He felt a rush of heat all over him. He broke out in sweat, and tears poured from him. He remembered the hot city street and sweating floods inside the rain clothes and the clouds gathering dark and rain and the rain dance in the dusty cornfield and rain and pounds of mud caking up on his feet and laughing and crying and rain and rain.

Morris picked it up percussive, and Billy built banjo patterns around what he did with the guitar as he built it up again, "Thank you God, for the rain you are bringing us." Again, and again. That part of his detached consciousness which was observing said he was losing the audience. It was too radical.

But his wife and his daughters and Morris and Billy understood what he had started and helped him build it, and it became more and more compelling, and more and more of the people added their force to the building. "Thank you God, for the rain you are bringing us." Over and over. Not as a chant, but as a building musical structure.

He walked, a stately crane, up and down the bandstand. "Thank you God, for the rain you are bringing us." He became a heron, walking in the rain, knowing the universe is harmonious, and rain in its time is harmonious. "Thank you God, for the rain you are bringing us."

It spread through the park in the hot evening. He saw raptors, peacocks, deer, bears, a porcupine, and people, people, people, all of them knowing rain in its time is harmonious, all of them working

together to manifest harmony and gratitude, to receive.

Some of them sang different names than "God," the names they could sing, "Nature." "Spirit." "Father." "Mother." All who stayed danced and sang. And clouds came, and there, in a small part of the valley, it rained. Rain poured down through summer air, soaked the people, soaked the trees in the park, soaked the asphalt and concrete, filled the gutters, and ran muddy toward the ocean.

For a long time after that day, Jason had trouble in his deepest thoughts. That this much, rain into a parched valley, was so possible, made him understand again the potential and the responsibility given to man. Understanding brought him to gratitude and joy, and to sorrowful frustration, at himself, at the world as humankind used it, at all his fellow raindancers.