

Come Firewalk With Me

by Bertie Bregman

The evening began with a yoga class. Chick, our facilitator, led us in a series of limb-twisting poses. This was good. If I was going to walk barefoot on a bed of red-hot coals, ignoring the organism's natural instinct for survival, I could use a little yoga to help loosen me up.

My first exposure to firewalking came four years ago, at a New York club. My friend Ken brought along his new girlfriend, whom he met on a commuter train early one morning. She had knocked him onto the floor for taking up two seats, and, admiring her directness, he asked her out.

Tracy sold insurance by day, but her real passion was firewalking. She spoke about it in quasi-religious terms, and credited it for everything from her promotion at work to her gutsy way of meeting men. She was finally in control of her own life, she said, thanks to the firewalk.

I was intrigued—as a scientist, by the phenomenon itself, and as an American, by the prospect of transforming my life in one, glorious epiphany. So when I heard that a group called “The Center for Transformational Growth” was holding a firewalk in nearby Woodstown, N.J., I jumped at the chance, dragging my girlfriend Stephanie along with me.

Twenty other people had the same

Bertie Bregman attends medical school in Philadelphia.

idea. We were a healthy mix of thrill seekers and New Age spiritualists, and the conversation moved easily from the joys of parachuting to ways to prove that life is just an illusion (we all agreed that a firewalk should do the trick). But a genial man named Mike best articulated our central purpose when he said: “The way I see it, man, if you can walk

self-actualization from his infomercials, where he pitches his line of books and tapes.

When Tony is not out recruiting Hollywood stars, he is running huge firewalks involving thousands of participants and multiple beds of coals. For a goodly sum, they are herded like cattle across the fiery embers toward the rain-

bow of self-fulfillment that awaits them on the other side.

Luckily, our experience was more intimate. After the yoga class and a meditation, we built a bonfire outside, near the edge of the farm where the firewalk took place. It had

been raining all day, but the logs and kindling were protected by a tarp and ignited quickly. I shivered nervously in the cool night air, but as we stood holding hands in a big circle around the fire, I quickly cheered up. My thoughts turned from the hospital burn trauma center (now, who were my connections there?) to marshmallows. I felt sorry that we had not brought some.

Chick solemnly opened the floor to anyone who felt moved to speak. After some awkward moments of silence, we offered up a few prayers, mostly of the global and personal transformation type: “Let this fire help us to break through the illusions in our lives.”

“Let this fire represent victory over our fears.”

Even, “Let this fire bring peace to the warring nations of the world.”

I whispered a private prayer to Stephanie: “Let this fire not burn the soles of my poor, uncalled, city-boy

“I whispered a private prayer to Stephanie: ‘Let this fire not burn the soles of my poor, uncalled, city-boy feet.’ She whispered back that I was being selfish, so I mentally broadened my prayer to include everyone’s feet.”

on fire and come out OK, what the hell can’t you do?”

Firewalking originated as a spiritual practice in India, but it has a certain cross-cultural, visceral appeal. The Vikings did it on hot chains. Sri Lankans do it as a religious rite. Tibetan Buddhist monks have a practice where they sacrifice a finger by making it a butter-lamp.

In our own time, G. Gordon Liddy showed America how tough he was by holding his hand over a candle flame, and Jean Claude Van Damme actually gripped a white-hot metal bar in the movie *Hard Target*. Conquering fire is the ultimate test of mind over matter.

In America, though, firewalking is most closely associated with Tony Robbins’ motivational seminars. Any channel-surfing insomniac with cable will immediately recognize this clear-eyed, square-jawed, New-Age prophet of

feet." She whispered back that I was being selfish, so I mentally broadened my prayer to include everyone's feet.

Apparently, the fire symbolized many things to different people. To some it represented fear, illusion, obstacle; to others it represented transformation, growth, or mystery. As a former liberal arts major, I was very comfortable with all of this. Fire-as-metaphor was my friend; I was just not so sure about fire-as-chemical reaction.

Finally it came time to walk. Chick broke down the bonfire and raked

crazy, that they do it to the pounding beat of a drum.

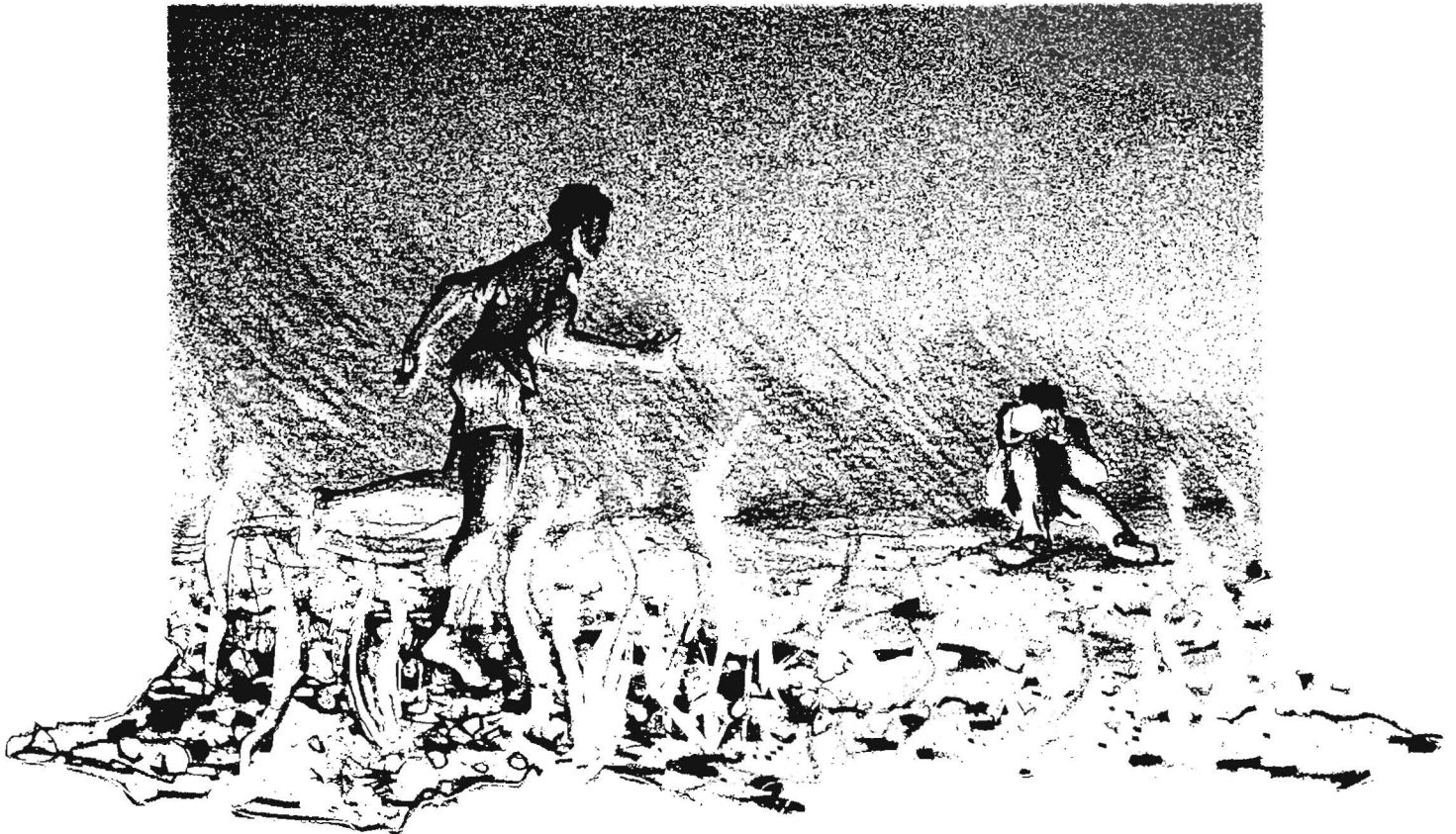
As we drummed, and rattled, and danced around the fire, whooping and blowing the conch shell, the collective mood rose to a feverish pitch. I felt like one of the little savages in *Lord of the Flies*. Kill the pig! Slit his throat! Drink his blood!

Suddenly, someone stepped out of the circle and stood facing the bed of coals. The darkness obscured his features, but we all saw him take a deep breath and walk toward the fire, palms facing the sky. Without hesitating, he

walked together. The man who believes that life is an illusion walked really, really slowly. And aside from the rare blister, no one was burned.

Afterward, we each had our theory as to how it worked. I reasoned by analogy with the Hot Sand on the Beach Principle, whereby the steady pace of walking ventilates your soles and limits their contact with the hot sand, allowing you to reach the ocean without burning your feet.

But the important thing, Chick insisted, was not how it worked, but what you gained from the experience. I



[David Wysotski]

the coals into a flat bed about nine feet long and four feet wide. We watched them flicker and listened to the hiss and pop of escaping gas. Here and there, little tongues of flame licked the air.

Some of us had brought along conga drums and rattlers, and Chick even produced a conch shell. This was an excellent idea. I highly recommend to anyone who wants to try something

stepped onto the coals, and strode across in five or six steps.

We all cheered, and one by one, followed his lead. Stephanie got in touch with her Buddha-nature before her turn; I got in touch with my lemming-nature before mine. After everyone crossed the coals once, some of us became cocky. One woman danced across, a guy walked backwards, and a few couples, including Stephanie and I,

thought about that on the way home, and realized that I actually had learned something.

I firewalked five times in all, and only felt the heat once. The reason was that halfway across the coals I noticed a photographer out of the corner of my eye, and instinctively came to a stop so that she could get a good shot.

I learned that night that fire may be an illusion, but vanity is very real. ●