

# *An Interview with Artist Dani Burch*

## *Awakening*

My daughter Susan died in 1986 from a brain tumor, a month before her twenty-first birthday—leaving behind a baby and a husband. For me, this was a huge awakening. It pushed me to face life in a completely different way and to ask myself, “What is this?”

That first year after her death I had powerful dreams—telling me that you don’t really die and showing me what really happens. In the first week, my daughter came to me laughing, “You don’t even need wings!”

I’d never thought much about death. In our culture, you just don’t. In fact, you’re thought morbid if you do, but I was dealing with the death of my own child. Children aren’t supposed to die before their parents. I was overwhelmed with the feeling that I failed as a parent because I couldn’t prevent her death.

One day, shortly

before she died, Susan grabbed me and held me to her chest as if I were her child. She was rocking me and saying, “Oh, poor Mom, we sure picked a hard row to hoe, didn’t we? We picked a really hard way. I’m going to die pretty soon.” I said, “No, no.” Then she said, “I have to. I’m ready. You need to get ready, and you need to hurry!” She kept talking about how difficult it was when we made the decision to do this. I could not just push away what she was saying to me because something deep inside recognized that it was true—we had made

this decision. It wasn’t something new—it felt ancient.

Susan and I were really close. She made me be. She would get in my face and say, “You’re gonna!” and then told me how and what she wanted; I would follow her lead. That experience has helped me to reach out to my own mother who was recently diagnosed with cancer. Through her illness and the death of her husband, we have been growing closer. I have been able to help her in ways I would not have been able to in the past. Because of my experiences with death, I have been able to reassure her about the process. Death really has been my teacher, and my prayers are being answered by allowing me to help and teach others.

I also had the opportunity to spend a great deal of time with my ex-husband, Milo, and his wife before and after his death last summer.



*My artwork has been the result of my grief, and the source of my rebirth, after the death of my daughter.*

*“Going Home,” raw clay funerary urn, detail 1998 Photos by Jerri-Jo Idarius*

## DEATH, MY TEACHER

During the last weeks that he was alive, he wanted a drum, so we made him one. I had learned a leaving song—a coming-and-going song. During his last hours, we drummed and sang that to him. I tried to keep in mind that his soul was finding its way out, and to encourage it to go where it needed to go.

Toward the end, he would quit breathing for long periods, and then catch his breath and come back. I didn't know what to do. No one teaches us

these things. He seemed to be having such a hard time getting out and letting go that finally I began saying, "Milo, jump! Just go ahead, it'll be okay; jump!" I felt as if he were stopped at the edge of a chasm and couldn't get across, couldn't get the courage to jump. A woman that was with us kept looking at me like, "What kind of a crazy person are you?" But I couldn't help it. In my gut it felt like he wanted to jump so damn bad, but he couldn't do it. At first I was just talking to him, and finally it was totally in frustration because I could see he was caught, so I yelled it at him. Then he jumped!

After he there was thing direct-to do mony I really to have people That didn't happen. I think it's important to take some time after the person has left to be with the body, clean it, honor it for serving well in life, and bless the soul on its journey. Now something is pushing me to walk past the cultural fears, to learn more and be able to



died, I felt some- inside ing me cere- for him. needed the other support me.



help myself and others make dying as important as being born—to make leaving this world as important as coming into it.

## Spirit Art

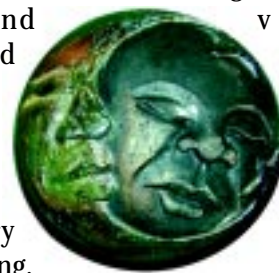
I had been working at a recovery home for drug-addicted women with children, and I was in despair because it was closing due to a lack of funding. We had worked so hard, and now the women and children were going to have no place to go. My overall situation seemed so bizarre. I had had surgery to remove my ovaries, and the hormonal change really knocked my socks off. I had turned fifty, I had lost a child, my soulmate and my job. I said, "My life has to change, God. This is it. I'm sick of it."

I went to lots of meetings, read books and looked for a direction. Finally one day in an absolute rage, I said, "You know what? I want to be an artist and a shaman. This is what I am." I didn't have a clue what a shaman was.

I was just enraged. I said, "I'm not going out to look for another job. I am not willing to go beat my head against all these walls anymore, deal with all the paperwork and the bullshit. I'm not doing it!"

Just prior to that, I had had a dream about spirit rattles. The dream had been short, and to the point. It showed me what a spirit rattle was, and it said that if I wanted my life to change I needed to just sit down and make ninety-nine of them and to quit bitching. It took me a long time to make ninety-nine, but I did it. I got fifty pounds of clay from the college and I made those rattles.

The next thing I made was a huge statue of a woman. If you could have straightened her out she would have been as tall as me. Her name was Sophia, and she was a black Madonna. Sophia sat in my front window cross-legged, meditating, for about two years before she crumbled. I couldn't fire her because she was too big. Her message was about women's power and that it was time for us to get up and thing instead of being pushed. It was a bit daring to put a naked in my front window in Potter I got some comments, but that matter. Some women found it very empowering.



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Then I went to Mendocino College and took a pottery class on Fridays. Somebody bought a couple of my pieces, and someone else suggested I put them in a gallery. I finally got the courage, and Main Street Gallery in Lakeport took some of my things. That was

*(Continued on right column next page)*



*Wood Gatherer (detail), clay sculpture*

## The Spirit Rattle Story

*The Spirit Rattle has been found in stories and ritual in almost every ancient culture. The rattle has been used in storytelling, healing, prayer, song, dance, soul retrieval and dreaming. We even give rattles to our babies.*

*This is one of the stories told by the Ancient Ones that lived just a little while ago. If a child became ill, afraid or was treated in any disrespectful way, the soul of the child fled its body to hide in the jungle or maybe in the forest, mountains or sea . . . or maybe in the city streets . . . or just under the bed. It was then the tribe's job to find the soul of the child and beckon and cajole it back to the child's body . . . for what is a body without a soul?*

*The tribe would sit with the child and sing, pray, chant and make small, soft sounds with drums and rattles. They built small fires to light the way. This could take many moons, many suns, because only when the tribe could bring their hearts and souls to love and peace in the sacred way would the soul return to the body. Sometimes the child would grow to a man and the soul would still be hiding . . . but it was never too late . . . so find your tribe, family or clan. And in a sacred way, call your soul back to you . . . for what is a body without a soul?*

*And, as the story goes, when the child has grown and the soul is ready to return to the great mystery, as is the way of all things, the tribe will sit with the man and sing, pray, chant and make small soft sounds on drums and rattles. They will build small fires to light the way, but only when the tribe*

*and the man can bring their hearts and souls to love and peace will he be able to let go and go home in peace.*

*D.B. 1998*

really exciting. I had a fancy, beautiful opening with music and the whole schmeer. They sold a ton of stuff—mostly the sculptures of African-American women. It was as though a power greater than myself were coming through the art. I've been so lucky, I can't tell you. One thing has led to another, and I'm now in galleries and shops all over.

### *New Directions*

My work comes in big waves, and changes periodically. I discovered that I have to make what I feel led to make or all the fun is taken out of the work. At one point I had made so many rules for myself that I didn't want to work anymore. I told myself things like, "Well, that gallery always sells those kind, so you've gotta make more of those." I was telling myself what I had to do rather than letting the spirit tell me. Finally I had to just relax.

Then I started making masks.

Some were these really wild African masks. After I made the first couple, they started coming as three pieces—a mask, a chest plate and a hand holding wild-looking stuff. The hand looks like it's coming out of the wall. As I started making these, I began to get a picture of how many masks I wear, and how many layers I use to defend myself. I also began to get a glimpse of what is underneath. The idea was about the different ego masks we wear—and our option to take them off. The breastplate showed how we defend ourselves. As I have progressed, the masks are beginning to dissolve, the breastplates are gradually disappearing, and the hands have gone from defensive clutching to becoming more open and heart-centered. None of this has been consciously driven. When I try



*Unnamed clay sculpture*



to work consciously, it becomes stiff. The process of talking about this is giving me more clarity and courage to be open with others about my artistic journey. The art has become my teacher, and an important part of my spiritual growth.

Now I'm sculpting Native Americans—whole tribes of them. My favorite is a woman protected by a warrior who stands behind her. She is the power and the leader of the tribe. On one side of her is a drummer and on the other is a staff carrier. I have no idea what tribe they are from, but since she is sitting, holding a rock and looking so centered, I call her "She who throws rocks." You wouldn't mess with her, or her tribe.

A lot of my art ends up with people who are very ill and dying. I continue to learn about the process of living and dying. Dying is not just about the grief, but about the processes we go through to help ourselves and the souls that are leaving this earthly life.

Last year, I started making urns. This started as a class project to make our own urn, but once I started, I became fascinated and had to make more. They're almost like batiks on clay. No one was able to tell me how to get a white image on a black background without using shiny conventional glazes. By getting out of my own way, I was led to use white acrylic paint. When it fired in a Raku kiln, the paint burned off and left a light ghostly imprint on a dark background. People who have lost someone dear to them often see one of my urns in a gallery and they call me on the phone. By their descriptions, I can often help them find the urn they are looking for. They're not at all like the urns you see at the mortuary and they are very affordable. People tell me they touch something deep.

I don't earn a lot of money doing this art, but it's enough to live on. I have a cute place out here in Potter Valley with an extra big yard and a sweat lodge in back. People come here for a monthly healing circle. The front room is a showroom for work that is on its way to galleries. My work area in the back has three kilns, and I have a separate living space—everything I need is right here: I have my work to do, my friends come by, and money comes right to my mailbox. All this shows me that I can really have what I need by following my heart.



Two views of "Wailing Woman" with spider nest in her mouth.

clay sculpture

**The place where my heart  
has been is hollow  
My guts had fallen out.  
My hair burnt off  
My flesh fell away.  
My child, she has died.**

**Dani Burch, 1994**

*One of the first sculptures I made was of a wailing woman who is sitting on a rock clutching her hollow stomach. She is looking upward and people who see her tell me you can actually feel her pain. I have had her for four years, and she has moved around the house. Last winter a spider made a nest in her mouth, and its web created a very fine veil that hung from her head down to her shoulders. This reminded me of the veil of forgetfulness. She personifies grief, and yet she is evolving all by herself. She seems to be telling me that the way to heal is to continue to allow the creative power to come through. Spider as a totem animal signifies illusion.*

## Journey to the Unbroken Circle

Passionless, through the night of crystal shards  
which cut my feet and heart 'til the Path is clearer by starlight,  
I wander in amongst the trees who murmur ancient bark language,  
To lie on soft gray mosses, be tickled by squirrels' tails and  
falling pine needles.

She who travels with me is wisest of the Wise  
a Nature Spirit born of deep places,  
the dark spaces,  
Furred, scaled and feathered at will,  
she is seen and often not recognized.

I meet her at the well and the pools,  
the cave and the mountaintop  
Where we make sacred ceremony to  
the wind and the rain, the sun and the moon.

And my Sisters come to join us soon,  
painted in soul-colours,  
wearing priestess robes,  
or clad in the sky, glowing with anointment oil.  
Here in this space of Silence,  
this space of worship and honor,  
we face the Great Mystery with courage and full hearts.  
Bowing to the Mother, we receive Her blessings with joy.  
Our Circle never breaks,  
our will goes back and around time  
to this our Sacred Ground,  
and embraces us in shine and glory, evermore.

Wilma A. Loeffler



Detail, Ruth, Crone Woman, clay sculpture

Dani Burch's work may be seen  
at the following locations:

Moonlight Gallery, Ukiah  
Connections, Sausalito  
Medicine Beads, Healdsburg  
Mendocino Art Center,  
Mendocino  
Blue Sky Gallery, Willits  
Grace Hudson Museum Store,  
Ukiah  
Lake County Museum Store,  
Lakeport



*As I practiced the rituals of working with clay, some ancient cellular memory awoke. This has not only produced the ideas, images and creative force inside me, but it awoke in me a deep love and respect for Mother Earth. Whether I sculpt from Her clay, or work with Her plants or dance on Her ground, it's all I want to do. This is when I'm happiest. ~*