

Featured story:

DANCE

Written by Max Neil Maximchuk

Sometimes when I like something, I like to get immersed in it. Dance is something that always captures my interest and once I decided to enroll in a course.

I feel a very special connection to dance, to movement in general. I suppose it's a little like my love for music. I am aware of my limits but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy it or feel moved by it. The years of somewhat playing the piano and sax helped me gain a little more insight into that magical world. And so it is with dance, but on a lesser scale. I am amazed with what can be expressed and it is unusual for me to walk past a street performance without watching at least a little of what they'd like to share with their public. In my university days I had season's tickets to both the ballet and the contemporary dancers and never walked away from a performance feeling disappointed.

During an intermission of one of the first contemporary dance performances I witnessed, I stood a little in the background of the circle made by my date and her knowledgeable friends. They had years of experiencing these cultural events and felt confident enough to comment on what had transpired thus far. I was amazed at how easily they attacked everything, the design of the set, the choreography, the dancing itself. Everything.

I was taken aback but rather than being intimidated by being the new kid on the block I felt compelled to interject a bit. It was just before we all entered to watch the second half and it took a while for me to find the courage for what I impulsively wanted to say. I told them that I was new to this world and no doubt that coloured my naïve impressions. Still, I had to express that what I witnessed moved me profoundly. I added that I hoped that I would never find myself unable to appreciate what was happening on the other side of that wall, that in becoming more familiar and sophisticated with that world, I would not lose what I was experiencing now.

A year or two later I felt inspired enough to enroll in a contemporary dance class. There was no special plan like perhaps one day I could become a professional dancer of some sort. Dreamer that I am, even I knew that that was out of my reach. Plus, as much as I loved movement and dance, I didn't have the passion or the dedication to become disciplined in developing those arts, even if I had been born with the talent.

Neither did I enroll even to better appreciate what those gifted and hard-working could do, though any first-hand experience on my part could add to that. No, the reason was simply because I wanted to try it.

Like my innocence when registering for the introductory music class, thinking of my previous school band experience, I thought I had a slight advantage because of the aerobics classes and martial arts training I had before. True, I was better off for that practical history, but like the music class, it didn't keep me from saliently being the least capable in the class.

At least now I was no longer an adolescent, and while I would have preferred things otherwise, I wasn't crushed by being overwhelmingly embarrassed or self-conscious. So, I plodded along, grateful for any progress that appeared my way.

The class was not designed for the very experienced or talented so none of us felt a great deal of pressure to impress the others. We pushed ourselves to try to get a better grasp of what was involved but beyond that there were no other expectations. This ambience was a good reference for later when I once taught a class of middle-aged housewives who signed up to get an idea of what speaking English might be like. That was in the times of a more relaxed programme and lower, more affordable prices. People had time and the money and could enjoy a gentler,

less aggressive approach. Sometimes when the ambitions are lower, more people can be reached and more learning can take place. We tend to forget that now.

So, there I was, stumbling about in a contemporary dance class, just for fun. That didn't mean I didn't work at it. I did. In class and at home in the wide space before my full-wall mirror in the living room. (It was also good for my martial arts.) And as much as I tried, some things appeared to be forever beyond my grasp. The best I could hope for was some very vague approximation. Again, with lowered expectations, I felt good with that.

We did stretching exercises. Movements expressing grace and enhancing coordination. There were running leaps and distorted sudden thrusts. Twisting and turning and flowing movements and more stretches.

It was great.

Some of them came together and began to form the basis of a sequence. As we became more familiar with the mechanics, we were in a better position to add a touch of style and individuality to it, making it more our own. We worked as a group as well, moving as one, being part of something bigger. It was a very good feeling.

Our instructor was pregnant, very pregnant. She provided us with a very earthy approach and I admired her low centre of gravity, from a martial arts perspective. She guided us and animated us and brought us through the classes.

My progress was slow, even for a beginner, but armed with the knowledge that I will never make it to the big time, I simply enjoyed what was happening. I tried to coordinate the moves and to bridge the mind with the body as much as I could and was satisfied with that.

Then one day my glasses broke. Without those glasses I was in a different world. Everything was fuzzy and a lot had to be deduced. For example, I could make out cars speeding past and the general contents of rooms, but I had to rely more on understanding than usual to supplement those rudimentary sights. The lights shimmered in a different way, as if they were behind a transparent but misty curtain. People's faces were unreadable. Even my hands placed on my lap were not as clearly defined as I was accustomed to.

In many ways this was the world I was to live in until a new pair of glasses restored me to the once familiar one. I felt more apart from everything in this world, especially because I rely so heavily upon seeing people's eyes and faces. But there was one way I felt more a part of something. And that was in my dance class. (It's curious how 'apart' and 'a part' can be used to refer to almost opposite ideas. Not unlike 'nowhere' and 'now here'. Language can be very curious at times.)

For some unforeseen reason I was able to understand and get those connections quicker and more easily without glasses. My body was much more coordinated and moved in those desired ways such that I became quite impressed with those changes. I was still far from dancing in the Russian ballet, and moving a 100 metres toward a distant star in the horizon isn't going to change anything, really. While those 100 metres of metaphoric progress may not make much difference to the overall distance, they did, however, make a lot to me. It was a wonderful feeling not only to have that extra spring in my leap, but to do 3 or 4 in succession successfully, with feeling. Well, that was really something. Other movements, too, while normally barely within my realm were now a little more accessible. That was without a doubt my best dance class ever.

The following week I got my new glasses and things were back to normal. Unfortunately this also included my proficiency in the dance class. I could see better, but not dance better. Yes, I did try doing the class without glasses, but it seemed a weird thing to do, even with good intentions. Now that I had the option of wearing them, I wasn't able to receive the same advantage without them and in the end I found myself less competent but more comfortable with them on.

A few short weeks later our teacher gave birth (40 minutes or so of labour and out it came, healthy and happy!) and we had a substitute to carry us through the final sessions.

I never took another dance course but I enjoyed the experience. I don't think it added to my appreciation of the performance I see done by the professionals, but I do have a better idea of how classes are and how it would be for somebody going to them on a regular basis.

AFTERWORD:

While on the road to learning one thing, I have often found myself learning many. I add a glimpse of a few of them in my stories when they can be integrated with the story with some integrity. The richness of encountering multi-experiences, even when blundering through something, has always been inspiring for me. In a good positive environment I am amazed at just how much is possible.