

To Dance is a Radical Act

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To dance is a radical act. To think about dance, to study dance, or to practice dance in this 21st century is a radical act.

Why?

Because if dancing matters—if dancing makes a difference to how we humans think and feel and act—then dancing challenges the values that fund modern western cultures.

How so?

1. *Mind over body.*

A first and fundamental value of western cultures is the one that privileges our mental capacity, in particular our ability to reason, over and against our feeling, sensing, moving bodily selves. *I think therefore I am.* We believe that "we," as thinking minds, *can* exert control over our bodily actions, and that we *should*. We believe that achieving such mind over body mastery is good, and even our ticket to success in any realm of endeavor.

This idea that reason is our definitively human part was greeted with much hope and fanfare by early modern philosophers and politicians, economists and poets. If only all humans can learn to exercise their reason, it was thought, then many minds will be able to arrive at the same answer--at true and certain knowledge, at a common good, at world peace.

However, we humans are not rational minds dwelling in bodily containers. We are bodies. We are bodily selves whose movements are making us able to think and feel and act at all. And if we are to achieve a just and sustainable world, then we must make sure that our processes of getting there honor the wisdom and agency present in the movement of our bodily selves.

To dance is a radical act because dancing reminds us that [the bodily movements we make make us who we are.](#)

2. *Individuals first.*

Second only to the value we accord mind over body control is the value we grant to a sense of ourselves as individuals first. We aim and claim to be independent and self-sufficient, generating our own resources and meeting our own needs. We enter into

relationships, ready to stay or go based on the benefits of that relationship to us. Yet, we humans are not individuals first. Before we can ever think or say "I," we have already been formed and enabled by others. [We are who we are by virtue of the relationships we create with those who support our lives](#), from the day we are born to the day we die. And if we want to create healthy and life enabling relationships with others, then we must acknowledge that we are interdependent bodily selves.

To dance is a radical act because it reminds us that we, as bodily selves, exist only as an expression of the matrix of relationships with ourselves, others, and the natural world that enables us to be.

3. Write it down.

A third value we hold dear is that of writing as a medium of knowledge. We grant an authority to words over and above any other medium as the one most able to document, preserve, and transmit truth and knowledge of any kind. This valuing of the written word flourished with the invention of the printing press and its first use: printing Bibles. People of any class or race or gender could access for their own individual selves the greatest mysteries of God. All they needed to do was learn to read.

However, as we now know, not everything that is written down is important, and not everything important can be written down. There are forms of knowledge that exist in media other than verbal ones. Reading and writing themselves are bodily activities demanding the precise articulation of muscle movement. Words cannot grant themselves authority. That authority comes from the lived experiences they express, and the lived experiences they enable.

To dance is a radical act because doing so implies that there are forms of knowing that cannot be mediated to us in words, which give words their meaning.

4. Sit whenever possible.

A fourth value derives from the other three. We privilege the kind of work that we can do sitting down, while thinking, reading, writing. We spend years of our lives learning to sit still so that we can master these tasks. When we succeed, we are rewarded by forms of employment that allow us to sit some more. When we are tired at the end of the day, we sit to be entertained, to be fed, to be cared for. We want someone else to do the heavy lifting. We work hard, so we can sit.

Yet, as bodily selves, we are born to move. We are born moving as the medium in which we learn, adapt, invent, and nurture the relationships that support us in becoming who we have the potential to be. Moving our bodily selves in such ways gives us pleasure—even our greatest pleasure.

To dance is a radical act, because when we do it, we remember the primal joy of moving our bodily selves.

In sum, if we dance, and if we claim that dancing matters, then we are also affirming that we are not simply rational individuals whose best health is served by sitting and writing. We are bodily selves, sensing, feeling, stretching-and reaching for the knowledge, justice, and peace we desire.

So what are we to do?

We need to find the dancer in each of us, and the dance in what we do. We need to breathe to move and move to breathe, and so cultivate a sensory awareness of our bodily selves as movement. When we do, we will have what we need to be able to think and feel and act in ways that remain faithful to the body of earth and our bodies of earth.

1. Dance for the span of the universe that you are.

All we are, as humans, is a span of flesh and consciousness. We each are a tiny swath of the universe where whatever energy it is that composes the universe is alive in us, as us, coming to life through us. The movement of life expresses itself in every movement we make. Every movement we make shapes that energy, gives it form, and sends it along.

To dance is to play with the movement that is making us. It is to cultivate a sensory awareness of how this movement is making us, and of how our own movements, as we shape and transmit the energy of life, are making us. To dance is to play with this movement in ways that allow us to discover and exercise our capacity to make our own movements—movements that align with our health and well-being. Dancing, we create ourselves. We become who we are. We are what we think and feel and do.

When we dance, then, we don't do it for our "self," per se. We don't do it in order to win a response (preferably praise) from others. We do it to participate consciously in the ongoing creation of what is as that creation is happening in us. We do it to let the universe that is us live through us.

When we do, we find in our bodily selves the ideas and motivation we need to move creatively and constructively in response to the social, psychological and environmental issues that concern us. We can, because we care. We care, because we feel what it is to be a bodily self. And with that knowledge, we have the surest moral compass there is.

2. Practice dance narrowly, understand dance broadly.

Often, when we begin to study dance, we start with one technique or one teacher, and quickly identify ourselves as students of a given technique. We perfect particular patterns of movement, and then build on what we have learned. In time, our movements gain strength and grace, and the timbre of a signature style.

At the same time, we always need to remember that no one form or technique of dance is itself dance. A form is a catalyst to dance. The exercises of a given technique are helpful

because they draw our attention to certain ranges of movement, quicken our awareness of these possibilities, and guide us to release our own energy through them.

Dance, however, is infinite. There are infinite possible patterns of sensing and responding, even within one relational bodily self. To dance is to exercise our capacity and willingness to play with the movements that we are and discover what we can do. This play can involve making new movements or animating movements of a given technique so fully that they become our own. In either case, however, the form is not the measure of the dance, only a tool for helping us find the dancers we are, and the dance in everything we do.

3. Welcome every obstacle to movement as an opportunity to become a better dancer.

When I talk about dance, one of the questions I am asked most frequently concerns those with limited movement. How can someone who is ill or paralyzed or physically compromised dance?

I reply: dance is creative movement. Any human who can move at all—who can breathe or blink or wiggle a pinky finger—and has the desire to do so, can learn to play with the range of sensory possibility that that movement opens up. He can create and become new patterns of sensing and responding. She can invite the neural network of her bodily self to create new connections. When we move in such ways, we align with the forces of creativity—of healing—at work in us. We dance.

The same logic holds for dancers who are sidelined with an injury. In so many cases, an injury happens because one part of the body—a strong part—is carrying more weight than it should. The injury is thus an opportunity to slow down, and find more sensation, more freedom, more play, so that we are able to animate larger and more dynamic patterns of stretch and strength.

When we understand dance broadly, we know that anything that happens to us in our life, pleasing or not, offers us an opportunity to deepen our experience of dancing and enrich our ability to dance.

4. Keep the love alive.

After spending time learning a new form, the novelty may wear off and our enthusiasm pale. Suddenly the movements that seemed so life-giving are routine. They don't produce the same sensory excitement. Inevitably the four-fold values named above creep in; we begin to try harder by exerting the power of our minds over our bodies, or we long simply to sit.

We humans are so good at creating habits. We are so good at getting caught in our habits, and forgetting that we were the ones who created them—even when we dance. Yet dancing remains our most potent resource for stirring to life the sensory awareness that reconnects us to our own creativity. As we play with movement possibilities, we open to

the life-enabling currents in us that are always looking for places to break out in new forms.

So when we dance, it is up to us to keep the love alive—to return to the pulse of our breathing, to reconnect with the movements that are making us, and so open to receive the energies of the universe coursing through us.

There is a dancer in each of us, and a dance in everything we do. Once we find that dancing energy, we have the most powerful resource there is for evaluating the impact of the movements we are making in all realms of our lives; for comprehending and empathizing with the pain we are creating in ourselves and others, and for sensing how to move in ways that will better enrich our lives as bodily humans in community on this planet.

If we are to survive the 21st century, we must.

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