

Teaching Philosophy

When I was a little girl, I would read books. For hours I would sit at the bookshelf in my living room and pull out worn hardbacks with thick white paper until an entire stack grew. For years I worked my way through those rows of cracked spines, placing and replacing each vertebrae until I could pick my favorite ones out by feel with my eyes closed. And then, I grew up. But the stories...they stayed with me. I like to think that my backbone is built of those books, that no matter where I turn (or maybe where life turns me), every page I poured over is there: supporting me, sprinkled through my blood and at the back of my brain, always just a little bit there, shadowing everything that I do.

Still, eleven years later, I can recall the story of Miss Rumphius, who spent her entire life planting flowers everywhere that she went in order to do her part in making the world more beautiful. How simple it seemed, when I could curl my bare toes into the carpet and hug my knees to my chest as I flipped pages on summer evenings. I found out, as every person must, that choosing to return something lovely to this broken earth (even as small as a paperback book) is also a choice to fight a whole lot of darkness that doesn't always courteously hover at the edges of little girls' dreams. But if a book about flowers could convince a ten year old that holding what little hope can fit in her small hands was worth more than gold when scattered beyond her reach, then maybe the greatest thing I can do now is teach others this truth. The simplicity of this goal is betrayed by its difficult implementation, because teaching is, with no other appropriate way to describe it, plainly difficult. But anything worth investing in is usually not easy. And so, the journey begins.

The greatest opportunity any person can have is that of showing another human being that they have worth apart from anything that they can do. It takes a specific sense of self, an awareness of the equal ground on which we all stand, in order to do this. It "requires engagement with identity, the way individuals conceive of themselves, so that teaching is a state of being, not merely ways of acting or behaving" (Andrzejewski, 19). Teachers are placed in an especially vulnerable place of authority, where the willingness to share and grow with others is the basis for a soundly impactful learning experience. Each mode of sharing this foundation is equally valid. However, the experiences that influence us as individuals are far more likely to be effectively communicated to others as we lead them through different aspects of life.

Since life seems to come together in the stories that our bodies tell cognitively, physically, and existentially, dance is an important art form of expression to continue sharing. Dance is an example of a well-rounded learning activity that helps to dissolve the "long tradition during which either physical development *or* intellectual development has been glorified, rather than both physical *and* intellectual development . . . dividing the two in our thinking. The result of this kind of thinking may be that we sometimes pull human beings apart" (Humphrey, 16).

Dance is the vehicle, and when it is paired with intentional knowledge of the multiple disciplines involved in helping it to reach its peak of impact, there is great benefit involved in the shared life of dance between teacher and student.

The pursuit of excellence is one of the ways that people find fulfillment and realize their potential for expressing their “inner landscape” (Martha Graham). Correct technique within dance can differ greatly depending on the style and its origins. But overall, there has been careful research done by experienced individuals studying the traditions of technique and the physical and mental safety involved in continuing to actively practice them. A teacher should emphasize “movement elements, dance as a means of communication, skills for observing and responding to dance, and the cultural and historical roles of dance as an art form ... includ[ing] ... the connections between healthful living and dance” (Andrzejewski, 18).

Tradition has value because of its historical importance, but it also must take into account the continued success of the individuals partaking in it as both dancers and people who continue to live outside of the dance classroom. Technique can be a beautiful, challenging aspect of dance when it is used correctly, and the role of a teacher is to both facilitate knowledge about the body within that context and encourage students to make technique work for their bodies and not the other way around.

The empowerment that follows continuing a legacy of dance and also allowing ones body to express itself uniquely using that legacy is engrained in the art form itself. However, it is the teacher’s responsibility to show students where they are in the continuum of history and then open avenues of exploration for the individual within the group. This results in “cultivation of student’s voices, relational understanding, helping students understand their bodies, and develop a sense of responsibility for themselves and others” (Stinson, 44).

There is no way to falsify the response that all people have to the world around them; we all experience it, and thus we recognize when emotions, thoughts, and premonitions are not genuine. But sometimes, opening up to the natural desire of the mind and body to work together in space and create from the center out is not immediately available to a student. Confidence, intuition, and the ability to stop thinking and let the body work its way around a problem must be engrained in students over time. The unique manifestation of this discipline of exploration “will depend on the way one sees the world” (Erkert 132).

Developing these qualities alongside technique and a knowledge of what has come before this generation of dance is what makes dance more than just a learned way of moving the body. Artistry comes from being a person first, and then an artist, and then a dancer. There is a reason for every choice a dancer confronts. For these experiences to have meaning, their close bond with the realities of life must be understood. Being more emotionally, mentally, and physically intuitive people increases the impact of dance on ourselves and on others. Obviously, although

we each see the world quite differently, the connections formed by the bond of our common ‘human-ness’ are what gives dance meaning.

The most important reason for taking teaching up as a profession is to pour into students and endeavor to grow alongside them. Otherwise, every movement is arbitrary and lacks meaningful existence. People together, life on life, not settling for the darkness and instead reaching for a light together is what makes dancing, in a word, good. “Consciously, we teach what we know; unconsciously we teach who we are” (Andrzejewski, 19). Technique is a mode of that expression, and an important one, as it connects us to our past and informs the future. It also protects the single body we have each been given to take care of and use in a respectful, engaging, resourceful way.

I was recently asked about the sort of stories that I enjoy. Thinking back to that wooden bookcase and all of the time that I spent pouring through page after page, many titles and genres came to my mind with little beckoning. But the answer that I gave is this: true ones. True stories. My own story has turned out much differently than I ever imagined, but I can’t help but wonder how it would look if I hadn’t had the guidance of teachers who cared enough about my story to invest in me as a person before I ever knew what role dance would have in my life. So what is the one beautiful thing that I want to be my contribution to the world? I believe ten year old me would agree as I say, being a part of the stories of those that I teach. For a little while, I have the chance to impact (even in the smallest way) the lives of my students as our lives intersect. I can’t imagine doing anything other than listening to the stories people have to tell and watching as they learn to dance them, too.

Works Cited

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