

DANCE *for* PDSM

CLASSES | TRAINING | RESOURCES

Transcript of a speech by David Leventhal for the Parkinson Disease Foundation's Annual Gala—Bal du Printemps in New York City in 2009.

There's a miracle of transformation that occurs every Wednesday afternoon in Studio 2 at the Mark Morris Dance Center. Thirty people join in a large circle and dance together. This may seem like a normal sight for a dance studio, but it's not. These students are from the Brooklyn Parkinson Group. As I greet the participants, I'm aware of their tremors and shuffling gait. Their inert faces mask the thrill I know they feel to be there. But once the music starts, they are first and foremost dancers, moving in a focused, conscious way.

The energy and desire to move has been locked up inside. Now, it's triumphantly released into coordinated shapes, dynamic motion and grace.

Later in the class, when some participants tell us they are losing their balance, it's time, once again, to cross another threshold. It's time for a big dose of encouragement and specific imagery, some inspiration from the pianist, and a reminder to breathe.

Within a minute, two circles of people with Parkinson's are gliding across the floor in a beautiful rendition of Mark Morris' Mozart Dances. It takes my breath away.

To dance is to live, to live is to dance.

We've probably heard this before. It's been attributed to the great ballerina Anna Pavlova or the great cartoonist Charles Schultz. And we could live without dancing and many of us do, but why would we want to? Dancing has been part of our human experience as long as rhythm and music. As my boss Mark Morris has said, we probably started dancing as soon as we stopped throwing rocks at each other--or maybe we danced in preparation for throwing rocks at each other. But let's at least admit that shows like Dancing with the Stars exist on the assumption that dancing is something difficult and inaccessible and therefore perfectly designed for reality TV. Which is strange, when you think about how long human beings have been dancing.

Like the general population, most people with Parkinson's disease probably danced very little before their diagnosis. But that's no longer the case, thanks to classes developed by

the Brooklyn Parkinson Group and the Mark Morris Dance Group and taught all over the world. Each week, for dozens of people with Parkinson's, Pavlova's maxim "to dance is to live" suddenly makes a lot more sense. Participants in Brooklyn and Berkeley, Toronto and Washington, D.C. have found that dancing, which they had no interest in before the disease—and was something doctors told them they wouldn't be able to do after their diagnosis—has come to play a central role in improving the quality of their lives and perhaps temporarily reducing some of their symptoms.

Even more than that, it has helped them rediscover their true identities as empowered, social and creative people who are unwilling to be permanently classified as patients. Every Wednesday at 2, they have an appointment with life. As one of our Brooklyn participants Carroll Neeseman says, "when I'm in dance class, I don't have Parkinson's."

When I dance I don't have Parkinson's.

Just think about that statement for a moment. Given that this comes from a man who's lived with PD for almost a decade, it's a wonder we don't have more research about what actually happens to us when we dance.

- What goes on in our brains and bodies?
- How does the brain transform artistic imagination into movement?
- How do dancers remember all those steps?
- Can moving to music rewire the brain?

Of course, PDF is at the forefront of exploring this kind of research. We hope that the neuroscience community continues to pursue these unanswered and complicated questions.

Thanks to Carroll and his classmates in Brooklyn, I've come to realize that dancers and people with PD have the same challenge: our brains and bodies must transform inertia into fluidity. We must find strategies to make awkward, difficult choreography come to life. For people with Parkinson's, this choreography can be as basic as moving one foot forward. Finding the ease, the logic and the joy of that movement is what our class is about. For professional dancers, this is our art. For people with PD, this is a matter of survival.

In fact, it was this fundamental similarity between dancers and people with PD that inspired Olie Westheimer, the visionary director of Brooklyn Parkinson Group, to approach the Mark Morris Dance Group. She figured Mark Morris' company would be an open, willing partner. After all, the dance group's aesthetic celebrates the power of dance as a communal, musical, and accessible art form.

Olie trusted that the class would work because she knew that dancers had special tools and techniques to figure out how to execute difficult movement with ease and grace. She guessed that the class would help break the participants' social isolation and depression. She understood that the essence of dance is joy. She was right on all counts.

People ask us all the time how we're comfortable taking risks with our participants. Won't they fall? Won't they get confused? But our class has been a collaboration from the beginning. Everyone involved has shared feedback and supported one another from the very first day. We've moved forward together, a group of people holding hands and dancing as a community.

Yes, putting one foot forward is a dance, but we do a lot more than that each week. Our students stretch, swing, march, skip, and balance on one leg. And they sweat. And laugh. We tap to Cole Porter and do flamenco to Carmen. We become the Sharks and the Jets in a dance sequence from West Side Story. And in every class, participants learn an excerpt of Mark Morris repertory.

Why is this so important to us? Of course we love Mark's work, and enjoy sharing it with others. But we also want our students to be part of a world-class artistic endeavor. So they come to see the company perform, and the next week they're learning the same steps they saw on stage at Lincoln Center. And there's an important mental challenge too: they become interpretive artists, placing the choreography clearly in their minds' eye. Just like professional dancers, they use a variety of mental and physical strategies to achieve the choreographer's vision.

Our favorite part of class is the improvisation period, when the dancers couple off and mirror each other. One person leads, the other follows. Reggie and Bobbye, who are here tonight, are a particularly good team.

Sometimes we suggest a theme, other times, half the room performs while the others watch. Whatever the format, the wealth of movement invention, emotional expressiveness, and the expansiveness of faces and limbs is humbling. And very beautiful.

This seems to get at the essence of what's amazing about the class: participants move gracefully to live music, create their own fluid dances, and encourage each other in their efforts. The neurologists are impressed with the wider gait, and the smoothness of action. The physical therapists ooh and ahh at the dancers' control. And the neuroscientists whisper about mirror neurons in action. But we just see a group of dancers moving gracefully through space. George Balanchine would have been very satisfied. He always said he didn't want dancers who want to dance. He wanted dancers who have to dance. These dancers, our dancers, have to dance because it makes them feel like themselves again. After all, dancing is living, and dancing makes them feel blissfully alive.

—David Leventhal
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