

# Dance

Joy Esterberg

An African man asked by a neighbor what he thought of the new school principal, replied, “I don’t know, I haven’t seen him dance yet.”

This struck me as a very telling comment. Not only how we dance, but how we move, speaks volumes. Are we clumsy, graceful, hesitant, fluid? For people with Parkinson’s disease this question is even more resonant, because who we are becomes obscured by our movement disorders.

Six years ago I was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. Four years ago I started taking medication. Two years ago I started dancing and found the Brooklyn Parkinson’s Group. BPG has collaborated with Mark Morris Dance Center to start an experimental free dance program for those with Parkinson’s. It has turned into an international program and BPG, a magnet for proactive, engaged people with Parkinson’s, has swelled in numbers. When I arrived was immediately welcomed into the community and impressed and touched by the openness with which the members embraced the dance program. The teachers, premier dancers all, perform movements that the class imitates, as well as inclusive exercises such as the “name game” and a series of farewell bows. Non-verbal improvisation done with different partners adds dimension to existing relationships.

Dance has always been important to me. I have watched at least a dozen dance concerts a year for the past twenty-five years and before I had Parkinson’s I did ballroom dancing. At first after being diagnosed, I didn’t think I would be able to dance again, but then realized I could work at my own level and, despite constraints, maybe even progress and improve.

Dance is magical. Using and focusing the body like an instrument—the paintbrush of an artist or the horn of the jazz musician—creates an intense integrative force. Research has shown the beneficent effect of movement and dance on the brain. Neuroimaging has identified regions of the brain that are similarly active when performing actions or watching others perform the same action, both of which we do in dance class.

Dance can be instrumental in identifying left-right signals that become blurred by Parkinson’s and can help restore them along with the underlying balance of the system. Rhythm is the means through which this is achieved. A steady beat like a central fulcrum regulates and supports the timing of movements to the left or right.



Photo by Rosalie O'Connor

Just as dance is good for the brain, it is good for the body. One of the pleasures of the dance class for me is learning basic moves such as ballet plies and relevés and the finger-snapping jazz steps of West Side Story. Sustained repetitive dance movements strengthen muscles and keep the body supple, which is of particular importance for people who suffer the relentless contractions that characterize Parkinson's. It is extremely important to commit to movements as fully as possible. Every dance step or movement has an extended ideal form. One must be able to envision that form, in order to embody it, which means doing the movement completely, to the utmost. That effort completes a mind-body circuit that strengthens the physicality of the body while preserving the brain.

Dancing is what scientists call an “embedded art form”. It is ancient—as old as our species and used ritually by every culture. Whether spontaneous or formal, learned or free form, rhythmic movement engages the whole being: body, mind, heart and soul. When we are alone and move freely to music, our bodies tell us what part needs to be moved and how, what pattern of movement will be restorative for us. When we are in a group we follow patterns in which emotion is both projected and controlled. The mind directing the dance movements becomes totally immersed in them; it becomes one with them. It creates aesthetic form using the body, and the total immersion in those patterns often leads to altered awareness and a feeling of awe.

Does all of this happen every time I dance? No, but the more I reach for a certain form in class the more likely I am to “forget myself” in the movement, which is the sublimity of dance.

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