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It's Who I Am

At three years old I tap across the stage in my tight pink leotard, underwear showing, fake elephant ears flopping around, and a huge smile pasted on my face. Clumsily picking up my feet and shaking my body, I watch the audience laugh and clap, believing I am the best dancer ever. Truthfully I have absolutely no idea what I am doing on stage, but I am loving every second of it. As I've grown up, my love for dance has grown exponentially, and today it is a significant part of who I am. It is how I release stress, exercise, combine both sides of my brain, create stories, and entertain an audience. Most importantly it is how I be myself. Since my first dance performance 15 years ago, dance has been my greatest passion in life.

Dance is, without a doubt, the best way I know how to release all of my daily stress. I clearly remember a gloomy afternoon last year, after a long day of school. I walked into my dance studio, Beach Cities Dance, carrying an abundance of emotional baggage: my upcoming Model UN debate, my failed calculus exam, the argument I had with my sister that morning, the divorce of my aunt and uncle, and the death of my Grandma. The dance studio was completely empty. The repulsive fluorescent lights were off, thankfully, and the blinds were casting shadows across the room. I put my things down, took off my jacket, and walked across the nicked up floor to the stereo. Plugging in my iPod I turned on the only song I listen to when I am sad, "Turning Tables" by Adele. Staring at myself in the mirror, I took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. I started to move, slowly at first then gathering speed. With each turn and jump a part of my

horrible day faded away. I couldn't stop. I wanted to forget everything. I danced across the floor, absorbing the music and filling the space. In only three minutes I was able to create a brand new me, and forget about the world I left behind when I entered the studio. Every time I have a bad day, I crave dance – my favorite cathartic activity.

Regardless of the type of day I'm having, the style of dance, or the length of rehearsal, dance is my favorite form of exercise. One day last summer the Senior Company was preparing for a national competition. I had a ten-hour rehearsal, on a hot Tuesday in a brand new studio I had never danced in, forty minutes from my home. I would be lying if I said I didn't want to be at the beach with my friends. Our director, Anna, knew our entire company was thinking this, and therefore was even harsher on us. By the 6th hour of non-stop dancing my arms ached, my calves were cramping, and my feet were bright red and blistered. Anna had polished every single section of my three-minute contemporary routine, stopping to fix each and every mistake along the way. I ran my triple pirouette into a jeté, landing with a single leg inversion at least one hundred times. After a ten-hour rehearsal my body was dead. I'm not exaggerating; I could barely drive myself home. However, the best part of the whole day was knowing I could wake up feeling broken the next morning, and live through another demanding day of rehearsal.

While dance is physically demanding, it is also mentally demanding. In particular, it is the perfect way for me to combine the logical left side and creative right side of my brain. One day in rehearsal, Anna, our director, was struggling to stage our dance, which is the process of putting dancers in certain places on stage. She needed ten people to cross the stage in a certain amount of time, in a certain pattern. Staging a dance can often be harder than choreographing, because it requires not only visualization, but also the ability to locate patterns. I quickly saw the best way to do this, but didn't interrupt her for fear of getting in trouble. After five minutes I

finally suggested a better way to fix the problem. I demonstrated that the ten dancers needed to turn left instead of right, step across themselves with the opposite foot, and then take three steps instead of four. Sure enough she agreed with me and we quickly resolved the problem. After a few months I became comfortable voicing my ideas, and would often mention the best way to stage certain parts of our routines. By my senior year of high school I earned the nickname, “the problem-solver”. Nonetheless, each week I looked forward to a long day of rehearsal because I knew I would be able to create effective solutions utilizing both the left and right sides of my brain to solve what I saw as minor problems.

Creating is a huge part of dance, whether it’s creating a story, a sequence, a full routine, or even a solution. I truly believe dance is the best visual medium to create a story. Two years ago, my company did a dance about bullying to a poem called, “To this Day”, by Shane Koyczan. This poem is unique in that Koyczan recorded himself reading his words and set his recording to powerful music. To prepare for this routine, I talked to my friends about their experiences with bullying, listened to other people’s stories on YouTube, and even went to the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles for greater inspiration. The lines of the poem I most vividly remember dancing to are, “maybe you used to bring bruises and broken teeth/ to show and tell but never told/ because how can you hold your ground/ if everyone around you wants to bury you beneath it”. At this point in the routine I truly felt broken. I felt the weight of other people’s stories on my shoulders, making the story I was dancing more sincere. At our annual showcase we ended the first act with this routine. By the end of the dance almost everyone in the audience was crying, because they could see what we felt, what the author felt, and what every bullied child feels when he or she walks down the halls at school. Dance can be used to tell any story, but I have

always felt the greatest emotional connection with the routines I did that served as a dance to perform, a story to tell, and a public service message to deliver.

While it's true that some dances do illicit emotional responses, some of the best dances purely entertain an audience. Since I was little dance has always been my favorite way to entertain others. A few years ago I did an a cappella tap routine called, "Shhh!" at the national competition my dance company attended annually. We were all homeless dancers tapping for food. While this might sound disrespectful at first, this dance respectfully represented the creative ways struggling artists work to make a living. We had a sign at the front of the stage that read, "Will tap for Food", and each cast member had her own humorous character she could develop throughout the piece. My purple beanie, ski goggles, and oversized vest were only the façade to my loud character, all of which were intended to make the audience laugh. We were falling all over the place, yelling at each other about traffic cones and peanut butter, yet managed to continue tapping the entire time. While our taps were extremely precise, we drew in our audiences with our creative stories and overall performance. Throughout the routine the judges were laughing, the audience was laughing, and at some point all the dancers on stage were laughing. We won first place with that unforgettable dance that not only entertained our audience, but also brought attention to the sticky situation dancers can find themselves in when pursuing what they love as a way to make ends meet. This routine reaffirmed my love of performing. I will never stop delighting in the joy I feel when I can amuse an audience on stage.

Fifteen years after my first dance performance, at age 18, I turn across the stage in my pink doll dress, cheeks painted red, blonde braids swinging around, a huge smile painted across my face. Effortlessly picking up my feet and moving my body, I know the audience is attentively watching me, sitting on the edges of their seats. I am in complete control of my body, yet my

movement is second nature. I have done this a thousand times. I can now let my body take control and let my mind wander, observing myself from the inside. Dance is the way I live. It's how I cope with my problems. It's how I exercise. It's how I tell stories. It's how I entertain others. Dance is my life. It's who I am.