Dance Education: Aliveness in the Present—
Cultivating Openness to Continual (and Positive) Change

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION
by Bill Evans
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On the occasion of my 67th birthday, this past April, I gave a solo performance as part of the annual Scholars Day Celebration at the State University of New York College at Brockport, where I am a full-time Visiting Professor/Guest Artist in the Department of Dance. Afterwards, one of my dear faculty colleagues told me that she found my performance bittersweet. She was right, I think. My dances express the pleasure and the pain, the triumph and the defeat, the joy and the sadness of the life I have lived. It is the bitterness, perhaps, that forces me to grab hold of the sweetness that life has brought me and to be grateful for it.

Sweet, indeed, is the warmth I feel this afternoon, as peers and friends gather to hear the words I am about to speak concerning my perspective on the current state of dance education, and my personal adaptations to it. I would like to thank Nancy Brooks Schmitz and the other conference planners who have given me the opportunity to share my thoughts and feelings with you today. Nancy and I first knew each other in the early 70s, at the University of Utah, where I was dancing with the Repertory Dance Theatre and she was earning an MFA in Modern Dance. She offered her warm friendship and enthusiastic encouragement back then, and she has done so on many other occasions over the years. Nancy, it seems impossible that almost four decades have gone by since we shared those golden days in Salt Lake City. I extend my heartfelt thanks to you...
for the support you have given me, and my gratitude for your visionary and generous service to the field of dance and movement education.

Until a few days ago, I had planned to have two SUNY Brockport dance majors, who have studied with me for the past three years, move for you during my presentation, because the values I will be discussing are embedded in the work I have shared with them and embodied in their performance of it. However, events beyond our control have forced us to change our plans. Therefore, I will take breaks from the reading of this presentation every few pages to dance for you myself, improvising to music by Pieter Bourke and Lisa Gerrard.

I may not be able to share all the words I have prepared, but I believe that much of my meaning is beyond words. Also, at age 67, this may be my last opportunity to perform at and NDA Conference.

At the State University of New York College at Brockport, I have found an environment in which students are more open to my methods and concepts, and more appreciative of what I share with them, than at any other place I have had the opportunity to work. I must admit that making the huge move three years ago from the enchanted land of New Mexico to the harsh winters of western New York ago has had its bitter aspects. However, the quality of the exchanges I have had with Brockport students has been so sweet that it has more than compensated for any difficulties I have encountered.

I stand before you humbly and gratefully. You are my people! My heart is full, and I shall cherish this sweet experience for the rest of my life.

Nonetheless, I can’t quite shake off the bitterly crushing sadness I feel for our sisters and brothers in Iraq and other troubled regions of our shrinking and struggling planet. My heart aches for the victims of tragic occurrences across the globe and for the desperate plight of the poor and disenfranchised in our own country. The cataclysmic events so many have experienced in recent
years, and the inconceivable suffering caused by them, have startled me into affirming daily my profound gratitude for the comfort and safety I had often taken for granted.

Sweet indeed is the experience of attending this conference—of being informed, stimulated, entertained, provoked and reassured by the generosity of those who are presenting us with the gifts of their scholarship, pedagogy, artistry and perception. I thank each one of you for sharing your knowledge and your passion, and I congratulate every person in the room today for doing all it took to find the resources, to cover your work and family responsibilities and to get yourselves here!

I want to express my deep gratitude for all her work in producing this conference to Colleen Dean, NDA Program Administrator, whom I got to know well while preparing my book, *Reminiscences of a Dancing Man: A Photographic Journey of a Life in Dance*, which was published by the National Dance Association in November, 2005. (I’d be happy to sign the books any of you may wish to purchase later today.)

Even as I indulge in the sweet joy of speaking [and dancing] at this wonderful conference, a part of me cannot ignore the bitterness of forces that are threatening educational values, personal freedoms and equal opportunities that have made significant achievement by somebody like me possible. We are in the midst of a corporate takeover of much of our government and our culture, and the American people are being manipulated with distortions of the truth and outright lies, as the life of our planet is being increasingly threatened, and as more and more of the resources of our country and our world are being systematically shifted into the greedy hands of the obscenely rich. As an artist and educator, I must express my despair and my profound concern for the future of our children and grandchildren.

And yet, when I go to work in the mornings at SUNY Brockport—or at one of the many other schools or dance companies at which I have the pleasure of serving as a guest artist—and begin to share my work, thoughts and feelings with vibrant and hopeful young people, my heart fills with an overwhelming assurance that everything is going to be OK. I have been blessed with a
lifetime of work experiences through which I have been able to guide and to share my knowledge
with young artists who passionately love what they do and are willing to commit their lives to doing
it better, even though they know the challenges they face in our profession will be enormous and the
chances for financial reward small. These courageous, determined and vibrant young people
rekindle my own passion for dance and allow me to rediscover myself and the concepts and beliefs
that guide me on a daily basis, through their fresh eyes. The massive amount of work I take on,
therefore, does not exhaust me. Rather, it regenerates me.

**MY JOURNEY**

I have been a dance teacher for 54 years. I was fortunate to have recognized my calling very
early, and to have had countless opportunities throughout those years to do the thing I love most, in
many corners of the world. My former University of New Mexico colleague, Jennifer Predock-
Linnell, calls me the “Johnny Appleseed of Modern Dance.” My long-time associate Kitty Daniels,
chair of dance at Cornish College of the Arts, has said that I live not in Seattle, or—more recently—
not in Albuquerque, or—now—not in western New York, but in the world of dance. I was quoted
years ago by *Dance Magazine* as saying that, “The real reason I dance is that I want to explode.”
What I was trying to express is that I want to be everywhere, and to dance everywhere and to
encourage people everywhere I go to love dance and to dance themselves.

And yet, despite the sweet fact that I have danced all my life and have loved dance all my
life, I was not able to love myself for much of my life. A bitter inability to feel that I was OK,
caused me to subconsciously undermine my own early success in the world and to suffer
incalculable loss and pain.

From the mid-70s through the early 80’s, the Bill Evans Dance Company experienced
phenomenal success. I assembled an incredible group of highly skilled, expressive and devoted
former students who became a dazzling professional modern dance ensemble. We were among the
most-booked dance companies in the country for several years. I received a Guggenheim
fellowship, numerous fellowships and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and considerable state, municipal and private funding. Hundreds of young dancers from all over the country moved to Seattle to study with me and members of my company.

In short, I worked very, very hard, and achieved everything I had ever wanted—except the ability to enjoy it.

Kids of my generation who were born gay in small towns like Lehi, Utah, grew up with a cellular-level conviction that we were not good enough. Countless unspoken messages from parents and other loved ones, and thousands of spoken or shouted slurs and insults from peers, convinced us that we should feel ashamed of who we are, and that no amount of hard work and achievement could ever make us worthy.

Finally, in my mid-40s, my years of silent self-loathing caught up to me and precipitated the dismantling of my non-profit organization, my school (which had been the largest center for contemporary dance on the West Coast) and a 17-year personal relationship. I was stunned by those losses into finally facing the demons that had tormented me since childhood, and into embarking on a process of change that allowed me to understand and proclaim that I am (and always was) a good person.

The lessons I have learned from my journey over the past thirty years have empowered me to become a catalyst for positive change among others in my various corners of the world. I now know what it means to be happy, and I can find joy and satisfaction even in the remembered accomplishments of my former, tortured, self.

Yes, you are my people. The dance education community has always welcomed me, not as a marginalized, hyphenated, gay-American, but as a regular human being who happens to have born gay. It was my dance teachers who saved me from more serious self-destruction, by giving me a place in which I could feel safe and valued. Sweet indeed are memories of beloved teachers, mentors and collaborators. Some of you are here today, and I thank you from the bottom of my
heart. The lessons I learned from each of you have helped me to lead a more purposeful life, and to more effectively serve my students, my colleagues, my profession and myself.

As “Billy Appleseed,” I have traveled for more than 40 years, to share my work as:

- a solo performer in my own concerts or as a guest with professional and college dance companies and tap dance festivals;
- the director of and a performer in my own professional company for 30 years and in other professional companies for 10 years before that, and three years since;
- a choreographer for professional companies and various performing ensembles—at colleges, performing arts high schools and regional pre-professional companies;
- a teacher of workshops and master classes in modern dance, rhythm tap dance, composition, improvisation and Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis, in conferences, summer festivals, colleges, conservatories and private studios;
- an adjudicator at American College Dance, Regional Dance America and international festivals;
- a speaker or presenter at conferences, festivals and other professional gatherings;
- a writer of books and articles for periodicals and professional journals;
- a consultant or evaluator for colleges and non-profit arts organizations; and
- an arts advocate and activist for non-profit professional and performing organizations.

Such traveling opportunities, plus my ongoing positions as a professor of dance at the University of Utah, Indiana University and the University of New Mexico (for a total of 22 years) and now at SUNY Brockport (for the past three), have allowed me to keep my finger on the pulse of education and performance in several sectors of the dance world.

OUR STUDENTS TODAY

I am delighted to share my perception that there are more excellent teachers of dance at work today than ever before. I have taught at many of the National and Regional High School Dance Festivals, including the very first, at the University of the Arts in the late 1980s, and the most recent, at the Governor’s School of the Arts in Norfolk, Virginia, last March. I have had frequent opportunities to work as a guest artist in performing arts high schools in different parts of the country since the 70s. I have been increasingly impressed and pleased by the quantitative growth of secondary school dance programs and by the qualitative improvement within them over the past 30 years. I have participated in as many as three American College Dance Festival Association
Conferences a year since 1980, and I have served as a guest artist in most of the dance departments in North America. I can confirm that the technical ability and the artistic sophistication of college dance majors improve every year. Our non-profit national dance organizations (of which NDA, of course, was the first) and the thousands of professional teachers who have volunteered their time and effort over the years to provide leadership and service within them, have helped to elevate knowledge and practice in dance education to unprecedented levels in schools of all kinds, in every corner of the land.

When I compare the opportunities now available to high school students in the little Utah town where I grew up to what I experienced in the 1950s, I am awestruck. When I compare the course of study, facilities and diversity of dance faculty available to me as an undergraduate at the University of Utah to what exists there—and in other major dance departments—today, I am astounded.

The Marge H’Doublers, Betty Hayeses and Alma Hawkinses of our profession, and the many graduates of their ground-breaking programs that they sent throughout the country to pioneer the development of high school and college dance programs, have created forces for positive change that have transformed dance education in innumerable ways since I took my first dance class in 1948. Almost every successful dance program had a visionary pioneer (some of whom are here today) who was willing to do whatever it took to challenge the established system, eventually forcing it to acknowledge and make room for dance. Even today, many of the recent dance graduates of our colleges and universities are engaged in their own pioneering ventures, as they establish and develop new dance programs in K – 12 schools and colleges wherever they have been able to grab a foothold.

Nonetheless, I am concerned that much of the teaching that is going on within these remarkable programs might too often be preparing students for our past rather than their future. I will discuss this concern later, in detail.
Despite the sweet experience of reflecting on the remarkable growth I have seen in dance education, I am troubled by my perception that much of the dance training in today’s private studios and conservatories, and even in some public performing arts high schools and college dance programs, has become to a large degree a reflection of the corporate values that have permeated our culture. Often, I observe that product has become increasingly important, and that process has become increasingly less significant, as dance teachers in the 21st Century have tried to satisfy the young people of the digital age, who have developed understandable expectations for constantly new stimulation and immediate results.

For 13 years now, I have specialized in teaching modern dance technique, conditioning, Bartenieff Fundamentals and an introduction to Laban Movement Analysis to first-year university dance majors, and in helping them make a transition from dance based on external cultural values, which they absorbed in the commercial studios where most of them spent countless hours over many years, toward dance based on a deep awareness of internal body-mind processes—the kinds of dance our early college dance programs were created to perpetuate.

Most of these students enter college with a passionate love for dancing. In the first of the six “letters” they write to me throughout their first semester, they share with me such proclamations as, “Dance is the most important part of my life,” “I live to dance,” and, “I have danced since I was three and can’t image doing anything else.” Most of them also possess the courage to pursue what they love in the face of all the difficulties they know will lie ahead. Very few of them have illusions about the financial realities of the dance world of the 21st century. I make sure that they know coming in that they will most likely have to support their passion for dance with other occupations, and that, even if they are among the few who find full-time work, the monetary rewards will be meager at best.

Most of them have incredible physical stamina and endurance, the ability to stay focused and bring positive energy to every class, and a willingness to work as hard as necessary to
accomplish the tasks set for them by their teachers and choreographers. Those of us who have been given the privilege of teaching this generation of new dance majors and minors are fortunate indeed.

Other attributes that most of these new dancers bring are both sweet and bitter. They include: extensive performing experience, but much or most of it in “competitions,” in which product is usually everything; abilities to pick up complex movement patterns rapidly, but mostly on an external level; impressive physical skills, but little or no conceptual framework through which to understand how those skills might be useful to them outside the routines or aesthetic context in which they were developed; and, a huge repertoire of steps, but little personally authentic expressivity or musicality. These characteristics, it seems to me, are the results of the widespread practice in private studios of using class time to prepare students for commercial competitions, rather than focusing on their developmental needs and using that time to help them increase the tools they will need to move forward successfully in the future.

In the late 40s and early 50s, I studied extensively and diligently in a “commercial” studio, but the world was different then, and my teacher—June Purrington Park—was able to take the time to instill within me a profound musicality and an ability to inhabit different dance personas effectively. The majority of the studio-trained dancers I teach now seem preoccupied with speed, complexity and technical difficulty, and, often, age-inappropriate seductive vamping. It takes much of our first semester together for many of them to start really hearing music as they move and to start fully exploring a range of personal expressivity in their dancing.

On a body level, the situation is more serious. Many of our incoming students manifest reflexive movement behaviors so deeply patterned into their neuromuscular systems that they have lost access to much of their own sensory experience. The external values of their training have resulted in mind-body disconnects that present enormous challenges for both them and their teachers. Most students arrive at college with poor alignment and inefficient movement habits that have caused chronic conditions in lower backs, knees and ankles. Many of them have become
shallow breathers and have relied to such a degree on overdeveloped superficial muscles that they have partially immobilized some of their joints and have developed virtually no core strength or support. It is enormously frustrating for students who have danced for as many as 13 years before entering college to learn that misalignment, excessive tension, core weakness and lack of breath support permeate everything they do, and that they must re-learn most of the vast repertoire of steps they have done for all those years in a way that incorporates efficient, connected and integrated dancing, if they wish to move forward to develop increased skill and artistry.

I find that most of our new students exhibit a strong concern for how they look to their peers, but little awareness of—or concern for—how they feel or what they sense happening inside themselves. Many have responded to such demands as, “Leave your emotions outside the studio,” or, “Shut up and dance,” and have learned to enter the studio as mere shells of themselves, and to take class staring at their own immobile faces in a mirror. For many, it has been very important in their previous training to learn to blend in with the group, rather than to investigate how to understand and value personal uniqueness (which I believe to be one’s most valuable artistic attribute). Such a student has learned to disconnect the person she is in the rest of life from the (diminished) person she becomes when entering the dance studio. She has a fear of being “different,” and is often painfully uncomfortable when asked to explore a movement concept or pattern through improvisation.

Many new college students experience discomfort when asked to reflect on and make meaning of dance experiences. They are often reluctant to speak about their own perceptions, sensations and feelings, afraid that their spoken responses might be “wrong.” Because of my personal history, I understand profoundly the diminished capacity to open themselves fully to the generation of new knowledge experienced by those students who have not yet discovered who they are—or worse, as in my case—the bitter psychic pain felt by those who think they must hide who
they really are. Few factors inhibit effective learning more than lack of self-knowledge and self-esteem.

Fortunately, of course, there are always some students whose prior training has been process-oriented or who were innately equipped with aptitudes that allow them to adapt relatively quickly and easily to the new world of college dance. I will speak later about the peer-teaching situations I facilitate so that these fortunate students can serve as models for their classmates.

Most of the students I had the opportunity to teach in my 16 years as a professor of dance at the University of New Mexico had succumbed to peer pressure and had learned to value inordinately the appearance of conformity. For that reason, I developed a course required of all incoming freshman dance majors and minors—and most transfer and first-year graduate students—which was designed to facilitate a process of self-discovery and acknowledgement of personal uniqueness. More about that later, too.

**TOOLS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE**

One of my most important role models, Irmgard Bartenieff, who lived until 1981, had a card on the mantel in her New York City apartment that reminded her, “Constant change is here to stay.” What was true in the 1970s, of course, is even more startlingly true today, when technological devices not even introduced then are in common use. The students we are now teaching will graduate into a world where the pace of change will be accelerating at a pace beyond anything we’ve ever known.

Because of my perspective as a Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analyst, I have made it my mission for many years to help students (and myself) develop tools for positive change—positive change. These tools for adapting and evolving include: 1) the ability to truly sense, validate and act upon kinesthetic knowledge and bodily wisdom; 2) the ability to understand fundamental underlying principles of human movement, and, therefore, be able to perceive, analyze, select and
embody changing styles of dance technique; 3) self esteem and student voice; and 4) awareness of, and willingness to engage with, the larger world.

1) The ability to truly sense, validate and act upon kinesthetic knowledge and bodily wisdom.

My friend Bette Lamont says that children in the developed world today might be described as “bucket babies” who were strapped into and carried around in various protective devices throughout their early months and years of life, rather than being held in the arms of their caregivers and being allowed time on the floor to engage freely in the developmental movement processes that children have experienced for countless generations. (2001) Many of these children enter our schools and studios with deficits in their movement experiences and body-mind connectivity that we must attend to if we are to prepare them for balanced and successful lives in the increasingly complex world they will inhabit as adults.

Those of you striving to integrate movement and dance in the elementary classroom, discover not just developmental disconnects in your students, but also obesity and poor conditioning to an alarming degree. Never in our history have the skills we possess as dancers been more needed by our students, and by our culture as a whole. As educational funding policies have changed, and physical education and arts programs have been threatened or eliminated in public schools in many regions, this crisis of children who do not move enough has been exacerbated. The long-term consequences of this predicament have yet to be fully comprehended, but I am convinced that there will be an astonishing increase in the number of chronically injured, ill and dysfunctional adults in just a few decades if we do not act with urgency to begin increasing or at least reintegrating movement into public education at all levels, everywhere.

It may seem that those of us teaching in professional dance training programs would not be impacted by this crisis, but I find that many entering college dance majors have pronounced deficits in their patterns of total body connectivity, coordination and integration. These deficits must be acknowledged and confronted if these young people are to cope successfully with the
complex demands that will later be placed upon them. I believe that all dance and movement educators need to integrate somatic practices into our teaching, in order for such deficits to be corrected, and for our students to gain full access to the kinesthetic information that is their birthright.

Because of a traumatic premature birth, I grew up with a serious deficit in my homologous, or upper-lower, developmental patterning. It was not until I made a daily practice of movement patterns based on Bartenieff Fundamentals a priority, in my 50s, that I was able to truly recognize, confront and finally correct this deficit. Even though I had been a supposedly elite mover for decades, I had managed to convert most upper-lower patterns to body-half patterns, while disguising them enough to satisfy the demands of choreographers. About 15 years ago, I finally confronted this deficit, and I learned over time to truly embody the internal connectivity that the homologous pattern made available. The resulting changes in my physical, mental and, especially, emotional functioning since then have been beyond what I believed possible. My own transformation has motivated me to make the facilitation of balanced developmental patterning for my students a top priority ever since.

My own process of learning to become aware of and to trust my bodily wisdom placed me on a pathway toward self-discovery and self-acceptance. It was facilitated by my study of Laban Movement Analysis and Bartenieff Fundamentals, which began more than 30 years ago when Peggy Hackney joined my dance company and the faculty of my Seattle school of dance. I am deeply and forever indebted to Peggy and several other extraordinary teachers and colleagues who facilitated my understanding and embodiment of Laban/Bartenieff concepts.

Linda Hartley, in *The Wisdom of the Body Moving, An Introduction to Body-Mind Centering*, articulates my own experience when she says: “My instinct told me that I was all up in the air. I needed to place my feet firmly on the ground and relocate myself clearly in my body. I began to dance as a means to both embody and express who I am. I found I was also on the path of
knowing in a new way that which I am. As I explored ways of making deeper contact with my body, my body was teaching me a new awareness of myself.” (1995, xxii)

Because I wanted our University of New Mexico dance students, to whom I referred earlier, to make similar deep contact with and learn from their bodies, the course I created for them was organized around the six basic evolutionary Developmental Movement Patterns, as articulated by Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen in her system of Body-Mind Centering. In two-hour sessions twice a week for a full semester, we studied and experienced those patterns, as they begin with cellular respiration at the moment of conception and proceed in early childhood through the over-lapping stages of navel radiation, spinal, homologous, homo-lateral and contra-lateral patterns of total body connectivity.

We studied and experienced these same neuromuscular connections within the context of Bartenieff Fundamentals, as they serve us in our adult lives, as Patterns of Total Body Organization: Breath (both lung and cellular), Core-Distal, Head-Tail, Upper-Lower, Body-Half and Cross-Lateral, discovering that images derived from these patterns can travel at the speed of light to organize and integrate the entire body-mind in an instant, to function efficiently—different patterns facilitating different actions.

We approached our understanding of these fundamental body patterns with the whole of ourselves, engaging the four functions of the psyche—thinking, sensing, feeling and intuiting, as they relate to Laban’s Motion Factors: Space, Weight, Flow and Time—to perceive which patterns were fully accessible to us, as well as which patterns could have been more available. We identified individual variations and relationships to each movement pattern, and we asked, “Is this way of organizing my body-mind serving my needs, or could I learn to replace it with one which might be more appropriate?”

We studied the process of change itself, learning to understand that growth requires change and that change is an ongoing, long-term process. As Peggy Hackney writes in Making
Connections: Total Body Integration Through Bartenieff Fundamentals, “…movement is a metaphor for change. But it is also an actualization of change. You are changing the habitual way you use your body and relate within yourself and to your world, as you practice moving in new ways. Your neuromuscular system is getting new information. By being actively involved in your own movement patterns, you can participate thoroughly and be in charge of your own change.”

(2000, 24)

We discovered personal meanings within the contexts of uniquely personal movement behavior and learned to recognize that one can move with full psychophysical involvement—being fully alive in the moment—only when personal meanings are recognized, investigated and expressed.

During the final two weeks of the semester—as each student presented the results of her/his personal journey of discovery, reflection and personal meaning-making—I repeatedly experienced goose bumps and was often moved to tears. In a typical semester, I witnessed more than 30 stories of genuine transformation, some subtle, but others involving quantum leaps of understanding and change.

Students described how and when the Patterns of Total Body Organization served them as dancers and in their larger lives—confirming that, in fact, their dance lives and their larger lives were seamlessly connected. They discussed which Patterns may not be fully available to them and—perhaps—why, often revealing childhood memories that had long been buried and unacknowledged.

They shared plans for future personal growth and strategies for facilitating further positive change—for letting go of those behaviors which they no longer needed and replacing them with patterns that would allow them to move forward in their lives toward personal and professional goals. Many of them described how the fear of being different or not good enough had caused them to hide, using movement to conceal rather than reveal who they really are. By being able to
recognize and wrap words around their individual differences, they were more able to claim ownership of those patterns and traits that make them unique.

Invariably, these recognitions of uniqueness were met with expressions of enthusiastic support from classmates. It was thrilling to witness students discovering and claiming ownership of aspects of themselves that had been hidden inside for years. I was not the only person crying, as students shared fears, doubts and perceptions of themselves that they had discovered inside and were now able to share, as they said, “This is who I am, and that’s OK.”

This sweet process of “coming out” as who they really are is something that I did not experience until much later in my life, when my unconscious feelings of shame about my true identity resulted in the mid-life catastrophe that I described earlier. In many ways, I teach today to continue a healing process for the injured young person I used to be. If I can help just one student avoid the disastrously bitter effects of that accumulation of denial, guilt and shame, my life has been worth living.

I have designed and implemented a similar course for the new dance majors at SUNY Brockport. One of the best parts of teaching it is that the students do most of the work themselves. My job is primarily to guide them into terrain which many of them have long ignored and then to get out of the way as they engage in the process of constructing self-knowledge. Over the course of a semester, we often discuss the difficulties one encounters in this process of going inside. “Why is it so hard?” they ask. I often find myself answering with the words that Betty Hayes spoke to me at the University of Utah 40 years ago, “Giving birth to anything is painful.”

Invariably, students realize how short a time one semester really is and that the process of change they have embarked upon has just begun. I often quote Linda MacRae Campbell, who wrote in her article, Whole Person Education, that “Scientific research in neurology, psychology and education has etched expanded images of what it means to be human. There is an unlimited
capacity for lifelong learning—and adults and children learn what has personal relevancy.” (1988, 16)

Repeatedly, students ask, “Why didn’t we know about this earlier? Why did we have to wait so long to discover these fundamental truths about ourselves?” I can only say that I believe it to be the birthright of every child to have the opportunity to construct this kind of self-knowledge, and that I am counting on them—our dance majors—to create strategies for validating bodily knowledge in the larger world wherever they go and whatever they do.

2) The ability to understand fundamental underlying principles of human movement, so that one will be able to perceive, analyze, select and embody changing styles of dance technique.

I believe that it is no longer acceptable to “train” our students in a style, or even different styles, of dance technique, wherein the same patterns and exercises are repeated, often over years, until they become smooth and “effortless” automatic behaviors. That practice may have worked in our past, but it does not prepare our students for the world they will encounter when they leave us.

Margaret H’Doubler’s ideas have guided me ever since I was fortunate enough to study with her when she served as a guest teacher at the University of Utah in the 1960s. In Dance, A Creative Art Experience, she said, “In building technique, then, we should try not to thwart and block the familiar reaction tendencies, but to release them in order that they may contribute to and co-operate with the goal-aiming efforts of the mind. If the aim is not uppermost, spontaneity will be lost, because of distrust in ‘instinctive inspiration.’ Organic unity between inner and outer must not be destroyed. New forms should mean growth within the life pattern, not destruction of it.” (1957, 93-94)

I believe that we must base our teaching of technique on a solid grounding in anatomy, kinesiology and physiology, and that we must give our students the perceptual and analytical tools they need to understand the difference between technique (which could be defined as movement efficiency and skill) and style (which could be defined as reoccurring aesthetic and
expressive choices), so that they will be empowered by their study of dance technique rather than trapped or limited by it. I find it appropriate to ask our students to invite into their neuromuscular systems only those reflex behaviors that are based on organic and developmental body-mind needs and processes. It is my conviction that we must make certain that the movement patterns we engage in repeatedly over time are based on healthful, regenerative and efficient ways of moving, wherein the student’s awareness of what she/he is doing—and why—is never sacrificed.

Six years ago, when I began a certification program for teachers wishing to study and pass on my methods and materials for teaching dance technique, I listed some thoughts on the subject:

- Technique class is a communal event. It is ceremonial—almost tribal—where we connect to the earth by moving together for a common purpose.
- I don’t teach “technique,” I teach people.
- Life is movement. Movement is change.
- We must frequently ask ourselves, “Where within myself am I disallowing or resisting change.”
- The technique class allows us to shut out the rest of the world temporarily and focus on sensing, feeling and renewing.
- A technique course can be a journey of self-discovery.
- A technique course can serve to validate differences and honor personal uniqueness.
- Dance technique can become a tool through which precious individual differences can be discovered, explored, defined and celebrated.
- A technique class is a collaboration among the teacher/guide, the students and the musician.
- The key to healthful and regenerative movement is finding balances of—
  comfort and risk,
  exertion and recuperation,
  stability and mobility,
  function and expression, and
  (in the words of my LMA mentor Peggy Hackney) “inner connectivity and outer expressivity.”
- I believe that the dancing body is a musical instrument and that one can learn elements of music theory and total body rhythmic coordination and phrasing within a technique course.
- Most people want to get better, but most of us are afraid of change.
- In technique class, we can study the process of change itself.
- I believe that the process of gradual, positive change offers the profound joy of continual newness throughout one’s life.
- My role as the instructor of a course in dance technique is to try to understand and to serve the needs of the people who become my students. It is also to—model a process of positive change,
  facilitate development of the willingness and courage to change,
  help create a non-judgmental environment in which student-desired change is supported and encouraged, and
guide the generation of knowledge that will give students perceptual, verbal-linguistic and analytical skills to help themselves grow.

- Before I can serve a student’s needs, I must learn as much as possible about who she/he is.
- I try to perceive each student as a whole person.
- I try to open avenues of communication with each student, to elicit feedback and questions, to really listen and to respond honestly and non-judgmentally.
- I try to let go of expectations that are not relevant to the student.
- I try not to make assumptions about a student, but to be alive in the moment, open and responsive to spontaneous interaction.
- I try to acknowledge openness to the pursuit of positive change as well as the actual achievements of my student/collaborators.
- When I realize that I have behaved inappropriately, I apologize. I hope that my collaborators will do the same.
- We are all in this together. I am here to support your growth. I hope that you are here to support mine.
- I try to help a student recognize and understand, but not judge, her/his habitual movement patterns, so that he/she may then decide to embrace such patterns or to replace them over time with more efficient behaviors.
- Without context, there is no meaning. Therefore, I give students opportunities to understand the life experiences—both bitter and sweet—from which my work emerged, and encourage them to discover the ways in which they can apply the knowledge they are generating in my classes within their own lives.
- Within a technique course, a student can discover and understand choices—
  “What ways of organizing my total body will most effectively help me accomplish the tasks at hand?”
  “What choices will honor my body’s needs and help me move in healthful, regenerative ways?”
  “What choices will allow me to become more articulate and connected (coordinated and organized within my body-mind) without limiting my expressive choices?”
- Within a technique course, a student can investigate the elements of style—
  “How can I honor my uniqueness and my body’s needs while learning to make the movement choices that will enable me to perform effectively in the works of different choreographers, and in different dance forms?”
  “How can I choose among the various movement choices available to me, in the areas of Body, Effort, Shape and Space—as defined in Laban Movement Analysis—to become an articulate and expressive dance artist within the style I am wishing to embody at this time?”

3) Self esteem and student voice.

Linda MacRae-Campbell has said that, “A stimulating and loving environment enhances learning through the human intelligence, which includes...kinesthetic, visual, musical and intra- and interpersonal elements....We now know that it is mandatory to incorporate the body, the mind, the feelings, the social and intuitive dimensions of the individual in the learning process....and [that] the willingness to confront emotional issues not only benefits learning, it also influences self-image,
the single most important factor in determining an individual's success in any endeavor in life.”

I try to facilitate the creation of safe environments where students will have the freedom to claim personal voice gradually, and to discover how much each of them, and each of their peers, can contribute to the process of generating knowledge for the whole community of learners.

I believe that hierarchical systems of dance training have lost their relevance for our students. I think that we should develop the ability to perceive each of our students as the individual she/he is and then invite the student into the process of change he/she wishes to pursue and we are able to facilitate.

I no longer “give class,” by standing in front of students as they face a mirror. We now begin most of my classes in a standing circle, where I can “check in” with them, telling them about the most relevant concerns and emotions that I am bringing with me, and asking them to reflect on information about themselves that will be relevant to the group as we begin our movement investigation for the day. I usually go around the circle and ask a few students or, if time permits, all students, to wrap a few words around their most relevant concerns and feelings.

We often begin our movement practice in that same circle, where we can all see and be seen by one another. I end my classes in a circle also, for a physical, mental and emotional cool-down and re-centering.

I ask many questions in each class, making it clear that we won’t continue until each student has voiced an individual response (often all at the same time). I want to make it clear that we are all free to speak, when appropriate, in every movement class. I invite the student to ask questions whenever I am not clear, and then I take the time to answer those questions as thoroughly as possible without losing the flow of the class.

Throughout the class, I frequently change the direction we face and my location in relation to the participants. Sometimes I stand in the middle of the group, and ask students to face
whichever direction they like, as they respond to my verbal cues and sense my physical presence without necessarily looking at me. Often, I ask dancers to face each other as we explore different movement challenges, and then to briefly describe for their partners what they noticed, sharing the “gifts of their perception.”

When I give guidance (rather than criticism) to an individual student, I ask the student if she/he would feel comfortable having her classmates “gather ‘round.” If she/he does, I ask her/him to repeat the movement pattern I want to address and then I ask the other students to watch and listen carefully to the gentle feedback and guidance I give. I often ask the class what they saw and what they would like that student to know before I make my own comments.

I often share written information about and discuss Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, with students in my courses. I invite reflections and comments from time to time on when and how they (and I) rely on bodily-kinesthetic, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical-rhythmic, intra-personal, interpersonal and naturalist intelligences to process information and generate knowledge. I frequently state my conviction that, “there are always many possibilities,” and that no one way of engaging with the world is innately superior to others.

I believe that it is truly a gift to be perceived in a nonjudgmental way, and I integrate opportunities throughout a movement class for students to work in pairs—one moving and one witnessing at a time, and then both sharing with each other what they saw. We all have much to learn from the perceptions of our peers, and I find myself relying increasingly on peer teaching as I work toward my lifetime goal of becoming a more effective teacher. As Martin V. Covington says, students “…learn that the rewards of contributing to the well-being of others may surpass the dubious benefits of triumphing over them.” (1984, 8)

I assign or ask students to select “study buddies” in all my courses, and ask them to work collaboratively with one or two other classmates both in and out of class, to support and encourage meaningful change and growth throughout the semester. Early in the course, I try to model the kind
of sensitive, honest and nonjudgmental feedback that I would like them to exchange, describing what work habits and processes I admire and/or what could be more efficient and productive about the way a student is working, rather than commenting on her/his character traits or abilities. In some of my courses, the final assessment project involves each student presenting an extensive report—utilizing visual aids and/or videotape and physical demonstration—on the process and progress that her/his buddy has experienced throughout the semester, and suggesting goals she/he might want to pursue in the future. The student being discussed participates in the creation of the presentation and usually demonstrates the movement issues being examined. I encourage all teachers to develop their own peer teaching strategies, because we cannot do all that needs to be done by ourselves, and because our students have so much to learn from one another, and we have so much to learn from them.

I believe that each student can be successful on her/his own terms, if we help her/him to develop an accurate sense of personal strengths and challenges and then to generate the knowledge to build on those strengths and overcome those weaknesses while moving toward personally meaningful goals. I think that we must create opportunities for each student to discover her/his voice, and that each student must be heard and acknowledged in a nonjudgmental environment.

Twelve years ago, as I described in my NDA Scholar/Artist Lecture in 1997, I began the practice of asking the students in my movement courses to write me at least four “letters,” or reflective writings, throughout a semester. These letters detail for me: first, what they consider to be the unique strengths and attributes that serve them as we begin our journey together; second, what goals they would like to establish for the semester, to work toward developing new strengths and positive attributes; third—near the end of the semester—their progress toward those goals; and fourth—during final exam week—a summing up of how they perceive themselves differently at the end of the semester than at the beginning, and in what directions they would next like to challenge themselves. I assign additional letters in various courses. For example, I ask the incoming
freshman to also write about the teacher who had the greatest impact on them in their pre-college training, and what they think that teacher might want them to get out of my course and their other studies at our institution. I often ask them to tell me what they have found most meaningful in assigned readings, and how they have applied knowledge generated from those meaningful passages to the work they are doing in my course and other classes. Despite the time and energy it takes, I always look forward to reading these letters, and I have often been amazed by the honesty, clarity, intellectual and emotional depth, diversity of inner experience and personal discovery that they reveal to me.

I respond at least briefly, in writing, to every letter. When I return them, I often ask the students to sit with me in a circle and then ask each if she/he would like to share something from her/his letter with peers.

I often ask the students to do a five-minute “quick-write” immediately after we have all shared a movement investigation or watched a student perform a choreographic study, even if we are about to engage in class discussion about that same experience. I then ask that the writings be shared with me, with one’s buddy, or with the dancer who has just shown her work.

On one of my last days in Albuquerque, three years ago, as I was preparing for the big move to western New York, a young woman who had just graduated in dance from the University of New Mexico passed me on the sidewalk. She had come to us from a small village in the northern part of the state and had struggled at every level to develop the skills and knowledge to work her way through the curriculum. It was particularly sweet to me, therefore, that she had ultimately been successful. We hugged and said good-bye. As I walked on, she called at me, “You helped me to help myself grow.” No words could have pleased me more.

4. Awareness of, and willingness to engage with, the larger world.

Dance is not my life, but it has given me multiple inroads through which to live a complete and satisfying life. Since the moving body is a microcosm of the universe, I believe that we
prepare ourselves to function successfully in the world by investigating, refining and trusting bodily wisdom. Nonetheless, for many of the students I have the opportunity to teach, the dance studio has been somewhat removed from the larger life of the community, the country and the planet. I hope that we can all find ways to help our students make connections between dance knowledge and all other areas of human experience.

When I decided to take on another full-time position after retiring from the University of New Mexico, I looked specifically for a program with a liberal arts orientation, rather than a conservatory approach. Over the years, I have drawn repeatedly on the undergraduate education I received at the University of Utah, where I majored in English as well as ballet, and took concentrations in American history, comparative literature, French and military science, as well as modern dance. Over the years, my breadth of knowledge has made my inner life more satisfying and my relationships with friends and family more meaningful; it has also made me a more adaptable and inclusive teacher, choreographer and administrator, and has allowed me to be of service to the various communities in which I have lived, on multiple levels.

I often encourage my advisees in the Brockport Department of Dance to consider the BA in dance (rather than the BFA) as well as a second major in another area of interest. I share with them my conviction that it is possible to become very good at more than one thing, and that they will need to be knowledgeable in many areas to cope successfully with the complexity of the rapidly changing world in which they will spend their adult lives.

When teaching courses that include both dance majors and general education students from across the campus, I pair the dance majors with the non-dance majors as study buddies. In class discussions in such courses, we all benefit from the multiple perspectives and personal connections to course content made by students from biology, physics, philosophy and other departments.

The facilitation of dance student empowerment at SUNY Brockport is impressive. I admire professors Jacqueline Davis, Sondra Fraleigh, Susannah Newman and others who created
this remarkable learning environment over many years. Brockport students are included on virtually every faculty committee, and students are given significant responsibilities in the process of preparing for and presenting more than 10 different student or faculty choreographed productions each year. Dance majors research/write/choreograph and deliver more Scholars Day presentations than the students of any other department on campus. Every dance major is required to provide significant amounts of service each semester in order to earn the right to perform in or choreograph for departmental concerts. The Brockport NDEO student chapter hosted their own regional conference in the summer of 2006. The Brockport Student Dance Organization obtains funding for and produces a three-day Dance Awareness Days conference/festival for the greater Rochester community each spring. It also obtains funding for, selects and hosts a professional dance company for a full-week’s residency each year, as well as numerous individual guest-artist residencies throughout the year. Students have been allowed to take ownership of various aspects of departmental operation, and they are proud of “their” department. The citizenship of these dancers is at the highest level I have ever known.

The students who provide leadership for these initiatives have earned the trust that the faculty places in them. Through such service, they learn to interact with other campus agencies and to develop and refine leadership skills. Many of them have blossomed through the diverse experiential learning opportunities available to them, and have discovered strengths and interests that their previous lives—sequestered in the dance studio—had not permitted. I believe these students are prepared to provide leadership in the various communities in which they will find themselves throughout their lives, even if they are no longer involved with dance.

I often tell students that, “We are all in this together, dancers and non-dancers, alike,” and that, “We cannot expect the support of a culture that does not understand the relevance of what we have to offer.” In this era of diminished funding for arts and education, our students need to
become effective advocates for dance and dance education, through the kinds of experiential learning opportunities described above, if they are to survive and flourish as dance artist/educators.

The corporate takeover of much of our government, our media, and even the consciousness of many of our citizens, frightens me profoundly. I believe that it threatens our basic freedoms and way of life. It is my conviction that most dancers have the independence of thought, the access to bodily-knowledge, the creative problem solving abilities and the humanistic perspective that are desperately needed by our culture as a whole. I hope that we can all find time and energy to show our students how to more actively assert themselves, and to insert the affirmative and non-exploitative values and perspective they possess into the larger culture.

CLOSING WORDS

As my journey of personal change and growth has enhanced my self-esteem and sense of worth and well-being, I have learned how to become happy and, therefore, more useful to others. My life’s journey has brought me increasing amounts of joy and satisfaction, as I have learned from my struggles to develop the perspective and the skills through which I have been able to facilitate the positive change and growth of company members, students who have taken my college courses and workshops, and peers in various institutions and organizations.

I have told you my story, because I think it might be relevant to some of you. Since I was able to overcome what I once perceived as insurmountable obstacles, I believe that other dance educators can embark upon paths that will allow them to become life-long learners who experience positive change, growth and increasing satisfaction throughout their careers. It is only by investing in our own growth, I believe, that we can stay in touch with the vital processes that will enable us to stay alive in the moment, adapt to accelerating change, serve as models for our students, and collaborate with them in rigorous, thorough, passionate and joyful investigation of dance and its relevance to our struggling world.
References


Lamont, B. (June 18, 2001), personal communication