1997 National Dance Association Scholar/Artist Lecture

TEACHING WHAT I WANT TO LEARN

By Bill Evans

[This Scholar/Artist lecture was delivered to the National Dance Association General Assembly in St. Louis, Missouri (March 1997). The American Alliance of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) published it as a booklet and it was also published in a modified version in Contact Quarterly, Summer/Fall, 1999, Volume 24, Number 2, pages 43 – 51.]

Introduction

I am deeply moved to have been named the National Dance Association Scholar/Artist and wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Penelope Hanstein and the other NDA members who supported my nomination for this honor. I would also like to thank Don Halquist and Debra Landau, members of the Bill Evans Dance Company, who will complement my delivery of this lecture with their beautiful dancing, and my mother Lila Snape Evans and my daughter Thaïs Evans Densley, who have traveled from Utah to support me this morning.

I would like to talk today about the teaching of dance technique as I perceive it at this point in a long, challenging and satisfying journey. Dancing and teaching have been at the very core of my existence since I was a child, and I profoundly value this opportunity to address these subjects before a group of beloved peers, colleagues and future dance artist/educators.

As I have reflected during the past several weeks on what I would most like to say on this topic, several phrases which capture essential beliefs have kept returning to my consciousness: first, "dance is primarily an activity of the human spirit"; second, "I teach what I want to learn"; third, "technique is not working if it shows"; and fourth, "everyone has the right to experience dance." I would like to organize my words under these headings.

The Human Spirit

Several months ago, when asked to select a tentative title for a then unwritten lecture, I decided upon "Dance Technique—Enrichment of Human Movement Potential or Cultivation of Aberrant Behavior." As a professor in a university dance major program, it is often my task to guide students in replacing movement behaviors that are not serving their best interests with some which might more appropriately do so. I perceive that most of the students who enroll in our program have chosen dance as a major avenue of expression because of a spiritual quest. By the time I have the opportunity to work with them, however, the spiritual aspect of their dancing has often receded. I perceive that they have mostly been trained from a quantitative point of view, that they have been asked to meet externally measurable, idealized standards—rather than having been encouraged to voyage inside their bodies and minds to discover what goals might be realistic and might help them function more effectively within themselves and in the world.

I chose dance—or, rather, dance chose me—because I rejected the competitive team sports which as a child I was being forced to experience. I was not interested in learning the rules or skills of baseball, football and basketball, in which there was a right and wrong way to accomplish each prescribed task, in which one was either a winner or a loser. And yet I loved
moving. Even though I grew up in the farming village of Lehi, Utah, in the 1940's, where the only dance people participated in was folk, square or ballroom; I discovered tap dance through Hollywood movie musicals at age three and was creating my own dances and performing them for friends and relatives by age five. My parents purchased a portable record player and several 78 rpm records of such tunes as "Cruising Down the River on a Sunday Afternoon" and "I Love You a Bushel and a Peck." We had a 3-foot by 6-foot strip of linoleum under an archway between the living room and dining room rugs which became my studio and stage, where I would spend hours a day making up dances and teaching them to my younger sister whenever she was willing. My spirit soared at these times. I began to discover who I was and how I could celebrate being alive.

I had few physical skills and no information about the proper way of performing tap dance steps, but I was transformed by this participation in rhythmic sound and movement from a lost little boy who didn't fit in to a young artist able to connect to the universe through the age-old rhythms recorded on those 78 discs and through the audiences in my mind who were sitting in movie houses admiring my performances. I was discovering my way of being fully alive.

My parents had been reluctant to encourage my dancing, thinking that it was a phase I would eventually pass through. When they refused to buy me tap shoes I discovered that I could make sounds on the floor by holding my older brother's marbles under my bare toes. By the age eight and a half, such determined behavior on my part convinced them to allow me to take dancing lessons. My father found a retired vaudevillian hoofer who taught once-a-week hour-long classes in his basement in Salt Lake City. Charles Purrington was about to begin a new class in which there would be other boys (a prerequisite established by my father). Mr. Purrington was 72 years old and legally blind, but he introduced me to a magical world of flaps, shuffles, Buffalo steps, time steps, pas de bourrées, changements and balancés. I was in heaven. I practiced these steps wherever I went—on the street, going to and coming from school, waiting in lines when running shopping errands, in my parents' café and in my grandfather's pool hall, where I would perform a tap improvisation for anyone who dropped a nickel in the jukebox and gave another to me.

Throughout these early years of training I was fortunate that my teachers (first Charles Purrington and then his daughter June Purrington Park, who had been trained in Hollywood by Ernest Belcher, Marge Champion's father) emphasized the learning and performing of dances in a whole-body, integrated way, rather than focusing on rules or "proper" lines, shapes or positions. The rhythms we made and how we communicated to an audience were more important than how we looked. We didn't really study "technique" so much as "dancing," in various styles, such as tap, ballet, European character dance and flamenco. These teachers encouraged my passionate involvement in both classes and performances, and my self-esteem, which—because I had rejected sports in a sports-oriented family and community—had been extremely low for most of my young life, was enhanced by the positive responses I received from parents, teachers and classmates. We experienced the essence of dance, I believe, as it has been practiced by all cultures in all times. This was not high art, of course, but it gave added meaning to our lives and connected us to each other and to the music and dance icons of our popular culture. I rearranged and choreographed dances and performed them at church socials, weddings and various gatherings of clubs and civic organizations throughout our valley. I began to find my way of experiencing and reflecting my world and my place in it, of expressing my wonderment for the miracle of life.
I had barely begun to learn these steps myself when I started organizing classes after school in the bedroom I shared with my sister and brother, where I would teach a few willing classmates from the Lehi Elementary School the steps I had learned in Salt Lake City as well as some I was inventing myself. By age thirteen, I was teaching several dance classes a week in American Fork, where a high school friend of my mother had opened a studio and invited me to teach the more advanced students. At age fourteen, I choreographed my first major production, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, for performances in the American Fork High School auditorium, with live music and with sets and props that I made myself.

These untroubled days were not to last, however, because I was approaching adulthood and needed, I believed, to seek professional training if I were to seriously pursue a career as a dancer.

At age fifteen, I enrolled in the academy of a famous ballet master and choreographer who had recently moved to Salt Lake City. This remarkable man was particularly successful at training male dancers who went on to make differences in the world and I found myself in a group of young men from throughout the western United States who had come to Utah to study with this celebrated teacher. I met boys of my approximate age from cities and towns in Montana, Hawaii, Alaska, and Washington state who had also grown up as the only boy they knew who wanted to be a dancer. It was reassuring to be with others like me.

It was also in some ways upsetting. I discovered that my body was mostly "wrong." I did not close my fifth positions all the way. I did not "wrap" my foot around my ankle in *sur le cou de pied*, nor "bevel" it in *arabesque*, in which my knee always looked incorrectly bent. In short, even though I knew every step in the book, had excellent rhythm, was a "quick study" and communicated successfully with audiences, my feet and knees, specifically, and other body parts generally, did not look right, and, therefore, I did not look right. Therefore—I felt—I was wrong. I was entranced by my teacher’s remarkable charisma, charm, energy, passion and physical strength, but it was his opinion of my feet and knees, which most concerned me. I became obsessed with conquering them and forcing them to create the "right" positions and lines. I wanted desperately to please my new teacher who tried to accelerate my improvement by verbally humiliating me in front of the other students and—occasionally—by hurling his long black cane across the studio toward my "sickled" feet. I determined that my knees would become straight and my fifth positions completely closed, no matter how long it took.

Even though I eventually succeeded in this quantitative pursuit, the quality of my dancing, my self-esteem and my spiritual life went through a gradual deterioration. Many of my fellow dance students were able to thrive in this atmosphere, but it did not meet my needs. I discovered that my world of dance had become as competitive as the world of sports, which I had rejected, that there were winners and losers here too, and that when I looked wrong I was a loser.

If a student is continuously encouraged to focus on how she or he falls short of making "perfect" body lines or positions, his or her spirit can be broken. I believe that a student whose spirit has been crushed in the process of learning a dance technique has gained skill at too great a price and cannot experience dance in a full and satisfying way. As Linda MacRae-Campbell writes in an article entitled *Whole Person Education* (1988, 16), "Emotions inhibit or facilitate learning.... and performance increases with cooperation not competition." I believe that the body has ways of knowing and communicating essential truths about what it is to be human that can be blocked if a dancer's mind tells him or her that his or her body is not good enough. I believe that dancing that does not honor and reveal the unique spirit of the individual is in fact aberrant,
because the very urge to dance comes from the need to express with the whole of ourselves a spiritual statement that is otherwise inexpressible.

I believe that the limited and highly repetitive nature of movement material executed in many codified ballet, modern and jazz technique classes can create aberrant beings who lose their kinesthetic relevance for and connection to their audiences. Many traditional dance technique class practices have resulted in distortions of efficient neuromuscular patterning. For example, I often tell students in my classes that one can go through an entire, successful lifetime without ever doing a single passé (placing the toes of the foot of the gesturing leg—usually outwardly rotated at the hip joint—against the back or side of the knee of the supporting leg). Nonetheless, students in most classical, modern or jazz technique classes will execute between thousands and hundreds of thousands of such actions during the course of their dance training. Because early creators of European classical dance styles found this position "beautiful," the passé, has been incorporated into our theatrical dance training ever since. A similar but different action, a full flexion of the gesturing hip joint with the same knee flexed, especially when the legs are in neutral rotation, was considered "ugly," and has been avoided, even discouraged, throughout the history of the training of dancers in our European-based theatrical forms.

Ironically, the "beautiful" passé, when practiced disproportionately to other possible actions of the leg, can cause neuromuscular imbalances and over-use injuries of the superficial anterior thigh muscles, which can become prime movers rather than more appropriate auxiliary muscles in hip flexion and outward rotation. The practice of the "ugly" full flexion, however, can strengthen the iliopsoas muscle, encouraging it to remain the efficient prime mover in full hip flexion and increasing the likelihood that in this same position the six deep lateral rotator muscles will remain the efficient prime movers in outward femoral rotation. This full flexion of the hip joint is, in fact, one of the fundamental human activities through which the cross-lateral pattern of total body organization is developed as the child learns to crawl contra-laterally. I find that my body needs to invest regularly in this full-range action of the hip joint to maintain core-distal connectivity and balanced strength and flexibility. Other "ugly" gestures or positions, such as extension of the hip of the gesturing leg toward the right back high, middle, or low corners of the kinesphere, demeaned in my early professional training as "looking like a doggie at a hydrant," were also avoided by such early arbiters of acceptable movement materials for inclusion in dance technique classes. Because these rules of body line and position were determined from the outside in, initially by how well they helped to display costumes and jewelry, the body's well-being was not an important consideration. Rather, the decision makers in our European-based cultures dismissed the body and its ways of knowing. This was, of course, consistent with the centuries-old philosophical tradition of deeming the body as the seat of base "animal" needs and instincts, inferior to the higher attributes of the mind. The result of this denial of the ways humans learn and know through the senses resulted in the imposition of postures and movement practices upon the body externally in accordance with ideas about what is and is not "beautiful."

Information not available to the founders of such traditions has allowed me to value the beauty of a well-functioning body in tune with its connection to all other animals and life forms on our planet and the healthful, regenerative ways of moving that can develop from such a perspective.

Much has been said and written in recent decades about the unfortunate "objectification" of the body in our culture through beauty pageants, advertising, entertainment and pornography. I believe that dance teachers, choreographers, critics, audiences and even dancers themselves are
often inadvertently responsible for treating the body as an object, of denying the relevance of thoughts, sensations, feelings, injuries and individual structural, emotional and psychological differences, of failing to see the whole person. As Linda MacRae-Campbell says:

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. (1988, 17)

Despite the fact that I had found my early love affair with dance replaced by a struggle to become what I could not be, I persevered. I believed that those in authority—because they had been professionally successful—must know what was best for me. Since I was unable to make appropriate pictures with my body, it seemed somehow fitting that I should be verbally abused, that I should have to struggle against my body's deficiencies and endure physical pain.

In 1969, however, after almost 15 years of training in major ballet, modern and jazz styles of dance technique—which I continued to approach with full emotional and physical passion—determined to gain control of the skills that would help me express my choreographic message to the world—I found my 29-year-old body chronically injured. I suffered unrelenting pain in the lumbar spine; I experienced immobility in the cervical spine as a result of a large mound of protective tissue that had developed to shield my neck joints from percussive stretching exercises which required rolling rapidly through a position in which the entire weight of my body was placed on the cervical vertebrae; and I endured chronic knee pain, which had been misdiagnosed and treated for years by several medical professionals as tendonitis. (It was in fact, I later discovered, chondromalacia, softening of the patellar cartilage, resulting from lateral/medial muscle imbalance in my quadriceps and from inappropriate outward rotation of the tibia at the knee joint.)

At this point, fearing that my dancing years might already be behind me, I resolved not to take any more technique classes until I figured out for myself what my body needed. For the first time since I had entered the world of "dance instruction through intimidation," a phrase that characterized so much of the serious dance teaching practiced at that time, I decided to take control of my own dance training. I had once been in touch with a body wisdom, I reasoned, which had allowed to me learn quickly, dance expressively and find deep satisfaction in moving. I had gradually become consumed by my body's limitations, as pointed out for me by numerous skilled, successful, well-meaning but tradition-bound technique teachers, and had tried to overcome these perceived deficiencies from the outside in through force and hard work. I wanted to start over, to figure out from the inside what movement patterns would be safe, healthful and regenerative to re-pattern into my neuromuscular system.

Fortunately, I had been given a hiatus from the Repertory Dance Theatre, the professional company of which I was then a full-time member, to travel to West Berlin to create a new work for the German Opera Ballet. While there, I spent several hours each day alone in a huge empty opera house studio, exploring simple gestures, postures and weight shifting activities, trying to figure out what instinctive gifts had enabled me to be such a successful tap dancer as a child and how I could apply that information to my activities as a professional, adult modern dancer. I
began to accept the fact that I had learned to hate my body for what I was not, and I started a long process of accepting the realities of my physical structure and of respecting my body's messages to my mind. I discovered that my body would tell my mind what I needed if I would just pay attention to it. I became aware of patterns of breath-holding and permanent contractions in certain large, superficial muscle groups. I began to experiment with various mental images that could guide me to sensations of greater ease, fuller flow, more joint freedom, and eventual changes in muscle composition toward more symmetrical balance and healthier tone.

I was encouraged by early breakthroughs in this process of looking inside and acknowledging and validating what I discovered there, and the world inside—the integrated world of sensation, feeling, mind and spirit—gradually became available to me once again.

I became aware that my early tap dancing had included liberal use of what the Laban system calls "Shape Flow," breath-supported changes in the size and shape of the abdominal and thoracic cavities in support of gestural and postural activities. I began to incorporate the relaxed and natural Shape Flow qualities of the tap dancer (for which I then had no specific name) into my modern dance classroom and choreographic movement patterns whenever I sensed or felt that doing so might be to my advantage. In 1969, that was a radical addition to the modern dance vocabulary, which had been developed by an earnest generation of pioneering artists struggling to have movement taken seriously as profound communication, not mere entertainment. I discovered that my tap technique had encouraged a releasing of the superficial muscles surrounding the hip joint—a balanced use of the whole leg and foot by establishing what I eventually learned was a harmonious rhythm between the psoas and hamstrings as major initiators of femoral flexion and extension. I sensed a need to go "beyond passé," to full hip flexion of the gesturing leg, and as I patterned the "Evans passé" (as this action was called by some of my students) into my classes and choreography, I found a deeper strength and control for hip flexion and a greater range of motion in développés. I discovered that by replacing the over-reliance on the quadriceps and gluteals that I had developed as a ballet and modern dancer with a fuller use of the smaller, deeper muscles closer to the bone, I could find within a modern dance vocabulary the joint mobility and qualities of lightness and free flow that had characterized my early tap dancing. As I incorporated these sensed, felt and intuited changes into my ways of moving in modern dance technique class, I began a process of body-mind healing that has continued to this day. As MacRae-Campbell tells us:

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. (16)

I was learning with excitement and depth because I was finally admitting that my personal needs and awarenesses were relevant. Because of this process, I now believe that I should not only tell a student what is "wrong," but that I should stress what choices could more appropriately serve his or her needs, as he or she helps to define them.

**Teaching What I Want to Learn**

My mentor and friend, Virginia Tanner, invited me in 1968 to teach twice-weekly technique classes to her advanced students—about fifteen preteens and teens who had been trained since early childhood in her system of creative movement. In the Tanner studio, I had the best laboratory I can imagine for the exploration and development of a new approach to the
teaching of dance technique. I was able to work with this same group of young people over a period of five years, as they passed from junior high through high school and into college. Some of these young people even entered the Modern Dance Department at the University of Utah (U of U) as students when I became a full-time assistant professor there in 1974, enabling me to teach them for another two years.

These young people had not studied "technique" in any conventional way, and yet they moved fully, confidently, creatively and expressively. I made an early decision never to tell them that anything I requested of them was "difficult." I had the intuitive wisdom to really look at them, to study carefully the results of the movement activities I requested of them and led them through, and to learn from them. Among these students were several exceptionally dedicated and gifted dancers, including Debbie Poulsen, who danced in my own Bill Evans Dance Company for 15 years, Tina Masaka who performed with Repertory Dance Theatre (RDT) through 1996, Mimi Silverstein, who danced with RDT into the early 1990's, Jackie Lynn Bell, who became an internationally successful teacher and choreographer and Ann Brunsvik Brown (Virginia's niece, who had been pretty much ignored until I was able to help her discover and reveal a profound body wisdom from which we all learned enormously), who has established her own successful children's schools and companies in several locations.

These extraordinary young people, and the exceptional trust and support I received from Virginia Tanner, provided me an opportunity I would never have had otherwise to learn what I needed to know through the process of teaching. I would often instruct through verbal images, as another mentor, Elizabeth R. Hayes, had encouraged me to do, rather than by demonstrating. I would then watch carefully as these beautiful young artists interpreted my images in ways that continually amazed me, with naturalness, ease and whole body-mind commitment. I was guided in this process by the words of Margaret N. H'Doubler, who had mentored Betty Hayes and with whom I had studied on several occasions. 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)

It was from these young dancers that I finally learned for myself how to access a full range of kinespheric space, free flow and dynamic phrasing. Many of them remain my friends and colleagues, and I remain enduringly in their debt.

It has been my practice ever since to emphasize in my teaching not only those awarenesses and skills that I have accomplished and that have served me, but also those perceptions and skills which have eluded me and which I have needed in order to create physical and emotional balance in my own dancing. I find that by asking students to embody a desirable body-mind trait or awareness I am able to more fully embody it myself. By repeating verbal descriptions of actions and images that I feel will encourage desirable change, I learn from students, who most often have fewer levels of learned reflexes to get in the way, how to access and embody such change.
Technique Is Not Working If It Shows

I just finished reviving a work on my dance company that I originally choreographed in 1970 as a tribute to Betty Hayes. Each dancer in this virtuosic nine and a half minute piece is required to execute hundreds of leaps/hops/jumps, to reveal accurately very specific trace forms and pathways in space and to master extremes of flow and rhythmic precision. However, the piece does not accomplish my intent unless the dancer also appears "natural" and spontaneous. I want this piece to express what it feels like for a "regular" human being to want to "jump for joy," to "burst with excitement." If the dancer colors the movement with aristocratic European attitudes, if he or she denies his or her body's volume or weight or the amount of strength required to execute such challengingly full and vigorous movement, if, in short, he or she is less than fully human, then I believe that the kinesthetic messages around which the piece was made cannot be communicated. We worked for months on this piece, developing the required level of physical conditioning, the understanding of spatial forms and clarity of spatial intent, the rhythmic and dynamic phrasing and the sensitivity of the dancers for one another; and yet—when it was performed—many people in the audience expressed feelings of wanting to "leap up on the stage and join in." They did not feel alienated from these dancers as if they were a different race, but connected to them and kinesthetically drawn into their seemingly spontaneous activity. I was very pleased.

Technique, I feel, should be a tool for enhancement of expression, rather than an end in itself. I admire virtuosity and refined development of physical skills as much as anyone. (At younger ages I loved to leap. In my 57th year I still love to turn, spin and spiral into and away from the floor.) But I also feel that if such skills are developed at the expense of recognizably healthy human functioning, if the skilled dancer loses a spontaneous aliveness in the moment, the very essence of dance can be lost.

I am deeply distressed by the kind of dance training that encourages dancers "not to think, but to do," over and over again, becoming essentially interchangeable clones of each other. Some critics and audiences are intrigued by dancers who seem like a race of thoroughbreds, who are so sleek, so hyper-mobile, so able to create extreme lines and positions that they become unrecognizable as "regular" human beings. I usually find such dancers unable to express a complete qualitative range, and therefore, not able to access their full human potential. Over the past few decades, American dancers in particular have often been encouraged to become extremely thin, to stretch their ligaments way beyond what a normal body would ever require for healthy functioning, and to hyper-extend knees, hips and backs in order to create more and more extreme (and, I think, distorted) lines. When I attend a performance by such dancers, I am sometimes deeply saddened, even when the dancer him- or herself is expressing joy, by what I perceive as a loss of one's most valuable possession, a healthy, integrated wholeness of body, mind and spirit.

I believe that the dance technique teacher should study anatomy, kinesiology and systems of body therapy and movement re-patterning to be able to understand and enhance the human movement potential of his or her students. Art, I believe, is about making connections (between the creator and him/herself, between the creator and his/her environment, and between the creator/performer and his/her audience). Training that distorts the humanity of the dancer diminishes the possibility of making connections to audiences, I believe, and can rob the dancer of his/her identity as a fully functioning, fully expressive member of the human race.

My own abilities to understand my body-mind needs and potentials and those of my students have been greatly enhanced by a study of applied kinesiology, initially under the
guidance of Karen Clippinger, a friend who taught in my Seattle-based Bill Evans Dance Company School for several years. Karen helped me understand that, as she said in Principles of Dance Training:

> An application of scientific principles of training to dance is needed. Close work among the dance, scientific and medical communities is necessary to evaluate old methods and develop new methods. There is much work to be done to sort out the valuable dance principles which have been passed down through generations from the myths. Such a process can only yield better methods of dance training and provide a beginning for more effective injury prevention. (1988, 82)

My growth as a teacher has also been supported by a study of Irmgard Bartenieff's (movement) Fundamentals and Rudolf Laban's theories of Effort, Shape and Space Harmony. I began to understand this work in 1976 when Peggy Hackney, an accomplished dancer and leading Laban/Bartenieff specialist, joined my dance company, and have continued over the years by learning from such Laban-trained professional colleagues as Gregg Lizenbery, with whom I danced for 18 years, and Janet Hamburg, who taught in the Bill Evans Summer Institutes of Dance from 1985 through 1995. These studies in applied kinesiology and Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis have given me contexts within which to understand and verbal language with which to communicate the discoveries from my inner world.

I have begun a more recent study of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's theories of Body-Mind Centering. By studying the evolutionary developmental movement patterns of the fetus and infant, I have become better able to understand the basic patterns of body-mind organization that serve or fail to serve us throughout our lives. By viewing dance technique as integrated human behavior rather than some kind of specialized, rarefied, exclusive or elite activity, I have been able to make connections between dancing and living at every level.

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 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)

As my teaching practices have evolved, I have tried to reframe priorities, goals, methods and materials I emphasize in dance technique courses in the contexts revealed by such inspired leaders as Clippinger, Hackney, MacRae-Campbell and Cohen. At the same time, I have been careful not to lose contact with my own body's wisdom and the style of movement which sprang uniquely from it and which is my personal contribution to the greater language of dance. I am gratified by the accomplishments of students who have taken my courses in recent years, and, as always, I continue to learn from them the true profundities of the information and theories I pass on to them.
Everyone Has The Right To Experience Dance

In the past few years, I have produced performances by the Evans Dance Company that have included diverse populations of dancers and musicians including: young and old (from eight to 72); disabled and non disabled; and untrained or trained (in modern, ballet, tap, clog, flamenco, African gum boot, Irish, jazz, ballroom, Mexican folkloric, East Indian or Native American styles). These opportunities have allowed me to understand even more fully that dance is indeed an activity of the human spirit, that free, full, dramatic, engaging, dynamic and expressive dancing can take place with no reference to a particular "technique" or specific skills or abilities, and that the study of technique and acquisition of skills can, in fact, be detrimental to one's ability to be fully expressive of what it is to be human if those pursuits do not honor organic needs and differences.

I believe that every child in our culture has the right to know his/her body from the inside out in the profound ways that a lifelong study of dance has given me. I am enormously saddened by the low priority that the body and its ways of learning and knowing are given in many of our public and private educational institutions. What is ultimately more important for any of us than the harmonious relationship of the mind and body? How can our society not value and insist upon the kind of whole person education discoverable through dance for every child in our culture? How can we in good conscience withhold such vital opportunities for fullness of being?

I had a brief reunion last year with a woman who had studied in my Seattle school almost 20 years ago. She caught me up on the details of her life and career, which no longer includes dance technique classes. She then thanked me for my teaching and explained how what I helped her understand about scapulo-humeral rotation adds enjoyment to her life every time she washes her back. The comment was more meaningful to me than almost anything she might have said about my dancing or choreography. The thought that I may have helped her find fuller satisfaction in something so fundamental as her daily shower cheered me immeasurably.

At this point, I enter the dance technique studio to remind my students of their connections to the rest of humanity, to the rest of the animal life of the planet, and to the basic compositional elements of our universe. I encourage students to bring their senses, their feelings, their thoughts and their intuition to each facet of the dance technique class experience. I encourage them to explore and acknowledge what they discover in these different parts of themselves and to ask, "What do I want and need, and how can my technique-class discoveries serve me in satisfying these wants and needs."

In December of 1996 I was invited to present a half-day session for the Pennsylvania Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance on the subject of my dance technique. In preparing for that challenging and rewarding opportunity, I made a spontaneous and somewhat random list of thoughts—a mind map, as it were—on the teaching of dance technique. Here are some of those thoughts:

Teaching technique is about:

• a passing on, an instilling, a modeling of a set of values.
• self-discovery, understanding choices; what ways of organizing my total body will most effectively help me accomplish the task at hand; what choices will help me move in a healthful, regenerative way?
• balance:
  of mind and body;
  of exertion and recuperation;
of body parts/muscle groups/body systems;
of container and contents;
of inner and outer;
of stability and mobility;
of thought, sensation, intuition and feeling;
of modes of movement—body, dynamics, geometric space and shape;
of motion factors—attitudes toward weight, space, time and flow;
of strength and flexibility;
of comfort/harmony and challenge/risk.

• validation of differences; dance technique is a tool through which precious individual differences can be discovered, explored, defined and celebrated.
• understanding elements of style; how can I honor my uniqueness while learning to make the movement choices that will enable me to work effectively in different styles?
• understanding that:
  the study of dance is a constantly evolving and lifelong process for each of us; this process of gradual change offers profound joy through continual newness;
  life is change and the opportunity to travel the journey of lifelong change is a precious gift.

Conclusion

I am currently completing a certification course in Integrated (Laban/Bartenieff) Movement Studies. Peggy Hackney, one of my teachers in this program, has articulated a list of questions in regard to the role of the body in learning. She asks:

Are we willing to value:
  • pre-conscious knowledge?
  • pre-verbal knowledge?
  • bodily knowledge?
  • body as intelligence?
  • expressions of your body as knowledge generators? (1988, 26)

As I have recounted my personal dance technique history in the writing of this lecture, I have come to understand that I did recognize and value these ways of knowing instinctively as a child and that I have gradually come to experience and revalue them as an adult. I am fortunate to have the guidance of colleagues like Ms. Hackney, whose commitment to lifelong learning continues to stimulate me, renew me and make me better able to serve the needs of students.

I began the practice two years ago of asking the students in my technique courses to write me several letters throughout a semester, detailing for me: first, what they consider to be the unique strengths and attributes which serve them in their dancing; second, what goals they have established for the semester to develop new strengths and positive attributes; third, their progress toward those goals; and fourth, a summing up of how they perceive themselves differently at the end of the semester and in what directions they would next like to grow. I always look forward to reading these letters and have often been astounded by the honesty and clarity, the intellectual
and emotional depth and the diversity of inner experience and discovery that they reveal to me. More than ever, I am learning from students.

More than ever I realize what a fortunate being I am to be able to engage regularly in such profound exchange with the mostly young artists who are students in the University of New Mexico Dance Program, the artist/colleagues of many ages who comprise the Evans Dance company, and my network of friends throughout the world of dance and dance education. These human beings are willing and able to remain vulnerable, to share with me their thoughts and feelings, and to let me travel with them on their respective and unique journeys through the dance of life.

I am learning what I want to teach.

References