***Dance yourself happy: Six ways dancing makes life better***

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“I’m... afraid... of getting too close.”

I was shocked by how much these words, spoken innocently as Jimmy, my teacher, encouraged me to lean forward, could easily apply to more personal areas of my life. In dance lessons it's remarkable how often something I hear – or say – can be applied meaningfully to make life better.

Want to be more productive at work? Have better relationships? Feel healthier physically and emotionally? Dancing can help you be happier and more mindful both on and off the dance floor. The first time I fell in love with partner dancing was when my French friend Jerome invited me to the dance floor, took my hands, and all of a sudden I was turning, moving as he directed with his wrists, all without words or any efforting. That’s when I decided I wanted to learn how to dance! Since then every aspect of my life has improved dramatically. Here are six examples of how dance is a metaphor for life and can make *your* life better!

***1. “Stand Tall and On Your Toes”***

Dance meaning: Bring your shoulders back and belly in, pull yourself up, and have your weight over your toes. Being “on my toes” in dance forces me to lean forward toward my partner. Not being on my toes creates distance between me and a potential partner, which may make me feel safer, but the costs are high – I can’t enjoy partner dancing if I’m struggling to maintain the separation between us, and I don’t get that heady feeling of being in the flow, gliding along the dance floor.

The expression ‘Stand Tall’ is equated with being confident and courageous. That is definitely how I want to be in life, yet sometimes I feel my shoulders hunching and drawing back – don’t notice me, don’t call on me... Being on your toes is taken to mean to be alert, ready to move. Being back on your heels typically means being reluctant, slow to react. When I'm back on my heels, I'm able to maintain some distance between myself and others which feels safer – it reduces my vulnerability and there is less of a chance to feel disappointed, awkward, hurt – but putting up barriers does come with a cost. Living the kind of life I want to live takes courage and confidence – it requires ‘standing tall and on my toes’.

***2. “Do Less”***

Dance meaning: Occasionally my teachers will tell me to do less, meaning don’t think so much, don’t work so hard. When I’m concentrating on too much at one time – my foot goes here, make sure my knee is facing the front, focus on a spot when I turn, pull my stomach in, turn my head left, turn the foot this way, shift my weight now... It's too much! “Do less” means let go and flow with the essence of the dance, choose one thing to focus on, and let the movement take care of everything else.

Being reminded to do less yields better results outside of dancing too. I get swamped in details and quickly feel overwhelmed. I put "do less" into practice by asking myself what are the handful of things I absolutely need to do today, and then I leave the rest to the universe to orchestrate. When I remember to do this, I am in *being* mode rather than *doing* mode and, paradoxically, a lot more ends up getting done (and it’s way more fun)!

***3. “Be Present in the Moment”***

Dance meaning: In partner dancing, every movement is being created in that moment, and it only lasts in the moment when you’re doing it – then it’s done. As a follower, I can’t anticipate what the lead will do, because he might not even know what he's going to do! If I’m not in the present moment, I am likely to miss my partner's lead and consequently not do a very good job of following, and the dancing isn’t as fun as it could be.

We've all heard the expression there is no past, there is no future, there is only this moment. Dancing is the epitome of living in the present. There is nothing else, nothing to take home or put on a shelf. Dancing is a good practice for what I want to achieve in my own life. Being awake to right now!

***4. “Take Smaller Steps”***

Dance meaning: When you take steps that are too big, you can’t keep up with the timing, so you get off beat, and it doesn’t look very good. Additionally, when you’re turning and take steps that are too big you can end up waaaay off track!

When you have goals you want to reach, don’t try taking giant leaps into your projected future! It’s much easier, and more practical, to divide big projects into manageable pieces. What small steps can you build in now? What’s a small adventure or change that you could try without much risk now?

***5. "Don't be clingy. Don’t pull on your partner. Don’t tell your partner what to do”***

Dance meaning: My job as a follower is to stay balanced, keep my weight over my own feet, stay neutral, and respond to the lead’s movements without pulling on him, leaning on him, clinging to him, pushing him, or looking for his approval. It is my job to do my best to follow my partner, not correct him, or give him “feedback.” Sometimes people tell their dance partner what to do. I’ve had dance partners tell me: “You’re supposed to be mirroring what I’m doing... relax your arm, let me move you, let your hip move, no, not that way.” Unless that kind of feedback has been specifically requested, telling your partner what to do is extremely annoying.

Don’t expect (demand) other people make you happy. That’s a lot of pressure to put on anyone. Make yourself happy. And telling your work colleague/friend/partner what to do, or worse, chronically giving anyone unsolicited advice can destroy relationships. It’s irritating, and makes people defensive.

***6. “There’s Always More to Learn”***

Dance meaning: I look at experienced dancers and sometimes feel frustrated because I’m clumsy compared with them. I make mistakes. I don’t glide. My feet become tangled beneath me, and sometimes when I turn, I end up miles away from my partner. And sometimes I have no idea what my partner is doing, and it feels like we’re each doing a different dance! Arghhhhh! Then again, I look back at all I have learned, and I’m a pretty good follower, and I know a lot of steps, and actually, I’m not bad, and I like the way it feels!

When I’m not good at something I enjoy, I wish I could just skip the learning and practice and be good at it already! I don’t always remember that learning is a process – I don’t like making mistakes, and I don’t like the awkward feeling that comes with learning. Yet, if I don’t go through the awkward and sometimes frustrating phase of learning, I won’t improve. Practice, practice, practice, until it becomes effortless. My speeches aren’t perfect, but they improve every time I stand up in my Toastmasters club and speak. I still make mistakes when I play bridge, but learn more every time I play. There’s no point in getting frustrated because I’m not perfect – there will always be more to learn! This helps me remember to relax because there will always be more to learn in my work, speech practice, and bridge playing as well as dancing.

These six dance metaphors for life are good representations of the many that continue to come my way. In addition to helping you be more of who you want to be in the rest of your life, dancing may be one of the fastest, easiest, most reliable and most fun ways to get yourself into a happy state. If you're looking for a way to be happier, on and off the dance floor, give dancing a try! You just might get hooked.

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