

## FEET FIRST

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I have always been a dancer. Since entering the world feet first, two months before my due date, I've been hyper-ready to MOVE and TAKE ACTION. Lucky for me, my parents sent me to dance classes at age five, since I was walking around on my toes whenever possible. By 13, I was performing with the State Ballet of Rhode Island, and at 15, joined the newly professionalized Boston Ballet Company. Those years of developing the ballet dancer took me to professional dance schools in Paris, where a renowned ballet mistress stated, *Quand elle danse elle chante* (when she dances, she sings), and in Cannes, France, where I later learned I was remembered as “La Petite Américaine.” My core identity was set—permanently.

Meaningful work would always involve connecting intensely with and for others. It would always be personal. Perfection would loom as the key goal. Work was expected to tire me out by the end of each day. As I matured, the challenge was to find and incorporate intellectual stimulation as well.

A half-century later, I now hold the position of Senior Career Counselor for Career Transition For Dancers, a program of The Actors Fund, a national human services agency offering a broad spectrum of programs to support the unique essential needs of all who work in entertainment and the performing arts. Not incidentally, during the past 40 years, my journalist/musician husband and I have

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spawned and nurtured three professional artists: a painter/professor; a dancer/choreographer/professor; and a musician/composer. In my 17 years as a career counselor within The Career Center of The Actors Fund, working with actors and musicians as well as dancers, I have witnessed how my early understanding of meaningful work undergirds the creative workforce and how what we call “the civilian world,” by not understanding the nature of performing artists and the art-making process, often impedes and destroys the career paths of our most expressive, creative workers.

I fell in love with ballet. My father filled our house with classical music and took me to see ballet productions that traveled to Rhode Island and during our trips to Europe. My mother was working as an assistant to a theatre director in Providence, surrounding us with creative, expressive actors and designers. At 13, I was performing with the State Ballet of Rhode Island, a community ballet company led by my inspiring teachers, Myles and Herci Marsden. When I was 15, my parents were encouraged to take me to Boston, where the Boston Ballet was in the early stages of building a respected professional ballet company and training ground. Summers studying in France complemented the intensity of working toward adult expectations of perfection. My school life was arranged so that I could attend private school in Providence in the mornings and travel to Boston in the afternoons and weekends for ballet class and rehearsals. The pace and demands I made on myself were too much. After two seasons performing in Boston, my body objected, my thyroid shut down, and life as I knew it stopped. Everyone was surprised, even my parents. I appeared to be performing so well.

The loss was devastating. In my hyper-critical, adolescent black and white brain, I blamed myself for failing to be worthy of my first love. I told myself I wasn’t good enough and that I should have tried harder. I was no longer “Patch the Dancer.” I found myself totally at sea, unmoored from any recognizable sense of myself. My career counseling studies and years of experience have illuminated the overwhelming intensity of early identity formation and the grieving

process that inevitably follows such a profound loss. Looking back now, I know what I needed was proper guidance to lead me back to a healthy dance body, as well as help to face the fact that I was not actually interested in becoming a swan. I was funny and jumped like the boys.

Without that intervention, the dance chapter ended. With deep sadness, I learned to live with my private, painful conclusion that I would not connect to others from the stage, and I went on to explore developing other skills and interests. Nothing would ever take the place of dancing professionally, but my life would offer me other wonderful, fulfilling, creative opportunities—new loves.

By the time my body recovered, I was in college, with my anorectic body a thing of the past. Even though I did perform with a modern dance group in college, I didn't believe in myself as a serious dancer anymore. During my college chapter, I also discovered that I enjoyed writing about theatre and dance for the college newspaper, as well as serving as "critic-at-large" for the college radio station. For two summers I interned at a newspaper on Cape Cod, where I wrote a feature piece on Herman Badillo. I then moved to New York, where I wrote for two trade publications and volunteered on Mr. Badillo's mayoral campaign. Again encouraged by my father, I attended Columbia Journalism School for a Master's degree.

Then I married a journalist working for *The Providence Journal*. We wanted children, and I knew I wanted to be their nurturer and guide. In the 10 home-based, child-rearing years, I volunteered wherever the children were involved and observed how creativity is either fostered or suppressed in schools and homes. Living then in Los Angeles, one connection led to a job offer in a part-time administrative position supporting a career counselor. Quickly, my research and writing skills were valued for writing reports about labor market trends and employment. I also learned from a pro how to craft targeted résumés.

And I learned about the counseling part of career counseling. I was delighted to learn how this work invited engagement in support-

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ing an individual's search for meaning and creativity in the working world. With my husband's encouragement, I decided to pursue a graduate degree in Educational Psychology and Career Counseling at California State University, Northridge. There I quickly realized that performing artists were the workforce most compelling for me to study and support. Obviously, my work as a career counselor has linked profoundly with my personal story, along with the formal study of how the physically and emotionally demanding adult lifestyle of the professional ballet world can challenge the vulnerable, still-developing adolescent mind and body. Much to my delight, I discovered that the transference of energy that occurs in collaborating and brainstorming with a client is as satisfying as the energy expended in interpreting music and stories through dance. And there was talking involved! (It had always been difficult for me to keep quiet in my dancing life.)

Through networking, networking, networking, when my husband's job moved us from Los Angeles to New York, I was able to find career counseling jobs at NYU, St. John's University, and gratefully, with The Actors Fund, where I am the senior career counselor. I get to engage in an ongoing dialogue with seven career counselors in our NY, L.A. and Chicago offices about the diverse ways performing artists explore and pursue financial and creative wellness in their ever-changing and challenging work lives. Since I view creative talent as valuable to our culture and as fragile as clean air, water, and green forests, I can say that my early passion for dance has evolved and matured into the passion I feel for empowering the professional artists among us.

Here's what work looks like to a performing artist:

- Your mind and body are your instruments.
- Investment of time and resources is required, with no correlation to potential earnings.
- Work is periodic or episodic; that is, dancers who get hired by a ballet, contemporary or musical theatre production company, can perform for multi-week fall, winter, spring, or summer festival

seasons with unpaid breaks in between, as opposed to freelance performers, who may work with multiple productions in jobs ranging from one- to two- week commitments, with no predictability as to how many jobs will employ them over any given year. Most dancers experience great fluctuations in income as a result of the lack of steady, stable employment.

- Even when getting paid for performing, performers must focus on getting the next job.

- Injury, illness, family crises, and other life events have the potential to detour career plans. Because their bodies are their instrument, and their athletic lifespan generally reaches to their late 30s or early 40s, any interruption in the daily physical discipline can lead to dancers finding themselves permanently sidelined. The time, expense, and effort to rebuild peak conditioning are often too daunting to achieve.

- Artistic success rarely connotes financial security.

- Performers are working more often than not on 1099s, meaning that benefits and security are always a struggle. (That has started to change with access to Obamacare).

- The unemployment system is challenging for freelancers, who are always looking for work but not in the ways the system understands.

- Taking a steady “day job” often means limiting time and energy to invest in future artistic work.

Solutions to “What do I do now?” are as diverse and varied as the clients themselves. Performers themselves are not aware of the highly developed analytical and communications skills their craft has given them. So much of what I do focuses on helping in the translation of skills from one world of work to another. Watching clients expand their view of themselves, their possibilities, and new ways of impacting the world around them is my great joy.

Generally speaking, dancers spend their early years practicing and learning how to take direction, reproducing precise movements repeatedly, and closely monitoring their surroundings and other

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dancers. As a result, they are on high alert for instructions from outside authorities on what to do next. When confronting their own next moves, they often need practice and support in exercising their own decision-making, based on their own needs. I help with that learning process, too. Here are a couple of examples:

J. was a Rockette, understanding that her youthful, high-kicking years were numbered. Beyond pursuing acting, she was at a loss as to how to seek out and/or identify and create other meaningful work. She was the person everyone trusted with their feelings and fears. With no college degree and no desire to pursue one, she somehow wanted to become a professional counselor/adviser. We hit upon interfaith ministry as a course of study and licensure, which would enable her to conduct life-cycle ceremonies and provide spiritual support. While becoming an interfaith minister, she wrote and performed a one-person show about her life, including being a rape survivor. She continues to travel with this play to community programs around the country, generating discussions about sexual harassment. This play has become her ministry, and she is in the process of writing a new work.

As a kid, B. drove his teachers crazy, and frustrated his parents. He couldn't sit still or concentrate on organized learning. His mother sent him to the local ballet and tap studio, where he quickly found that dance was more fun than anything, channeled his boundless energy, and, blessedly, focused his mind in class and beyond. During his ten-plus years as a Broadway dancer, advancing to the leadership position of dance captain, he volunteered to teach dance to kids living in a homeless shelter. His heart went out to the young people, whose pain and anger he witnessed. He told them that their despair and suffering were their "art supplies," and led them to self-expression and self-discovery through their bodies. Knowing that he was heading for a double hip replacement, he pursued a graduate degree in creative arts therapy, and consequently created a nonprofit arts organization dedicated to teaching tap dance to young people facing complex life challenges.

Every career discovery story is different, of course. But I've supported dancers who are still focusing on performance find meaningful sideline work in such body-centered modalities as yoga, Gyrotonics, acupuncture, massage, personal training, and nutritional counseling—areas where they have experienced positive outcomes relating to their own body maintenance and healing. Those with design skills explore interior design, Web design, and social media marketing. Dancers often have math and science skills, interests they can return to when they foresee the end of their performing careers. Current clients of Career Transition For Dancers are receiving scholarships to pursue graduate training in medicine or veterinary medicine, physical therapy, genetic counseling, speech/language pathology, or dance therapy. The dance teachers focus on the students and populations they wish to inspire, and design their career paths accordingly. Our program stresses adopting an entrepreneurial mindset in all endeavors.

While performers are challenged on all sides, they also have a lot to teach the “civilian” workforce about living with uncertainty and the need for what we call a “portfolio career”—incorporating multiple income streams and projects. Also, the artistic view of work is that everyone involved brings unique skills to the whole—sometimes referred to as the “orchestral model.” When people feel valued as individuals, the whole benefits. Performers also know a lot about rejection and loss. Their resiliency comes from the love of hard work and willingness to put up with the more stressful aspects in order to perform/create/express. Dancers bring discipline and active attention to all work throughout their lifetimes. They bring energy to ideas and images and to the people they reach.

Somewhere in my late 50s, my dormant dancer self-convinced me that I had let my body sit for way too many years, motivating me to pursue certification as a personal trainer and group fitness instructor. I delight in motivating others to dance and move in healthy—not perfectionist—ways to music. Best of all, I am dancing as a career counselor—observing and analyzing the energy, personality, values,

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and life challenges of professional performers, collaborating with them in the choreography of their next career moves.