

The Importance of Dance in My Life

Emma Ottosen

I have always defined myself as a dancer - ever since I was little, when someone asked me what I did in my freetime, or for one part of my personality, I would tell them that I danced. It's been such an integral piece of my life, for so long, that the words would flow unconsciously.

I'm a dancer.

As I've gotten older, I've had to make a lot of choices regarding who I've wanted to become as a dancer, and it was somewhat of a sensitive subject for a long time. There were definitely those who wanted me to pursue a team sport, or who didn't see the value of dedicating hour after hour to something that is inaccurately often portrayed as weak or easy. I've seen others make these decisions too, and I've seen more and more of my peers leave the studio to pursue some other interest, dance falling to the wayside. Eventually, I had to make the choice between basketball and dancing. It was one of the hardest choices I've ever made and I put it off as long as I could. But it had to be made eventually, and after much debate and struggle, I chose dance. I've never been happier with a single decision. Once I made the decision to keep dancing, it became clear that this was the right path for me, and I threw myself in, headfirst. My class schedule ramped up, I became a mentee, and eventually joined both Company and Honor Club. I have come to terms about who I am, and have realized the reasons why I dance, falling in love with ATD each time I enter the doors.

I dance for me.

Dance has empowered me. It is a way to push the physical boundaries of expression, as it connects both the mind and movements. There are rigorous technique classes, but dance genres such as lyrical, contemporary and modern are all genres that have allowed me to have space to move, to breathe, and to ground myself to something larger than my stressful and busy daily life. Not only this, but I feel as if I have found a family within the ATD studio, connections that I doubt I would have ever found without dance. Unlike anything else I have experienced, I realize that I have chosen to dance because it makes me feel good about myself, and pushes me in a way that allows me to grow as a person.

Company is an exemplification of these feelings. Performing on stage in pieces that have pushed me, provide an elevated sense of accomplishment. It's like an affirmation of all the sweat, all the bruises and all the hours that I've poured into dancing. Although I was only eligible last year, I know that ATD Co. is something special where I truly feel like an advanced dancer. Company also pushes me outside of my comfort zone. Never before had I done hip-hop, and there I was, on stage, performing to the all-powerful Bishop Briggs. It was something I never would have probably experienced, and although I was doubtful at first, I felt my confidence growing with each second I was under the pools of light. That strength gained was life-changing.

Everyday I know that ATD is a place where, even if for just an hour and a half, I can escape the constant tests and deadlines that loom over my head. I can breathe, I can move and I can focus in something that makes me happy and less stressed about everything else. This year has been particularly hard for me, especially within the academic field. I have a habit of making everything out to be a bigger deal than it is - everything needing to be perfect, placing pressure on myself to excel beyond what is often required of me. Since I started the International Baccalaureate Program, I've had less and less time to myself and more and more

work to get done. It's been hard to keep everything balanced in my life, and there have been times where I've felt close to cracking under all the pressure. When it gets close to that point, I've found that one of the best things for me to do is to take a few deep breaths, step back, and just play some music to improv to, in order to let out some of the negative feelings of stress and worry. This alone allows me to become re-grounded and helps me relax and finish what I need to get done.

Another example of this occurring was the weekend before I took my first SAT. I had already signed up late, as I wasn't sure I was prepared, and because of this, we were sent out all the way out to Poulsville. My mom and I had to leave the Friday before, and stay at a hotel, so my nerves were already raging, and my stomach was turning somersaults. It felt like the test was just looming, and part of me wanted to drive back to the study guide and pound everything that I wasn't sure I knew into my head. Instead, I forced myself to put in headphones, put my dance playlist on shuffle, and relax, working through the brain dance, and letting the familiar old tunes work their way through my body, washing out the nerves and fear. Whether it helped my score is up to speculation, but just listening and swaying and breathing helped my brain calm down and helped settle my nerves. It was like having a small piece of the studio with me. The idea of moving through what my brain and body are feeling creates a sensation of calmness, and the idea that, maybe, just maybe, I can accomplish what I need.

I don't know where dance will lead me. Obviously, I hope to pursue it, long after the curtain falls on my final performance with All That Dance. That definition is unclear, but if by any chance, I am unable to follow through, I am comforted by the idea that dance has taught me that it's ok to want to do things for me, because it makes me feel happy. It's taught me to take challenges head on, and that holding back will only hold me back. It's taught me what passion means, and how embracing my emotions, especially with dance, is better than pushing them down. Dance is a way to give back to both myself and spread love within a world which tends to be full of competition and self doubt. Dance has coped me through grief, through relationships and through pain. It has become more of an activity. What started out as a hobby has become an essential part of my identity that drives my ability both as a student and as a person striving to be her best, I am forever thankful.