

“Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day”

Cynthia L. Hallen

*“It’s the heart afraid of breaking
That never learns to dance.”*

—from “The Rose” by Amanda McBroom

Our ballet teacher says that every time we come to dance practice we learn something new about our bodies and our spirits. I have learned that my body has strengths and weaknesses. My natural turnout is not ideal. I can improve, but I probably never will point my knees in east-west pliés and north-south splits. I have to be careful not to torque the bending activities because my right ankle and knee are still weak from old accidents. My mother says that my right foot was bent up against the front of my ankle at birth, so every day for several weeks she had to massage it back into shape.

My left side is more limber than my right. Lower-back lateral flexibility is one of my strengths, so I am good at extending my leg on the bar. I have a good sense of balance, so I can also extend one leg back in arabesque position when we work in center without the bar. The pas de chat “cat-step” is my favorite pattern.

When we focus on one thing at a time, I can obey the teacher’s commands. When the instructions are more complicated, I often become confused. To simultaneously move my legs, arms, and head into different but complementary positions does not come easily. My brain seems to reverse concepts of right and left, up and down, back and front. I sometimes feel like a turkey, but I learn from watching and following the swans.

The teacher explains that some people have an extra bone in the foot that inhibits full arching of the foot and pointing of the toe. I must have the extra bone, because I sickle the foot in my efforts to gain extension. Every once in a while I feel the energy spiraling down my leg and out through my toe in a perfect line of beveled light. On a good day, I have won a word of praise.

Children who study dance are able to develop the rotator muscles that good ballet position demands. Starting ballet as an adult is harder because the outer thigh quad muscles want to do all the work in bending and lifting the legs. Learning to use the rotators means struggling to become again as a little child. Dancing means a restoration of my childhood—the joy of walking on my first birthday, the delight of discovering that buggy wheels move, the thrill of skating on ice.

I have a native sense of musicality. My body can dance or skate gracefully in spontaneous freestyle patterns when I am not feeling self-conscious. Music also affects my soul. When I hear fine music, I want to be good, I want to be kind, I want to be pure. My soul wants the discipline of dance, not just the freedom. But my in-born response to music does not automatically include a talent for counting and keeping time. Music and dance demand a mathematical precision that sometimes paralyzes me. I can sense the logic and see the purpose of the patterns, but I am confounded in performance. The temptation to quit dancing is strong, but my love for music helps me go on.

Some students have the gift to perform a complex dance figure just by viewing the teacher's demonstration one time. I usually have to learn the dance over and over again in separate steps, as if I am repatterning a part of my brain that has become lame. Perhaps my body is tired of being contracted by past fears, is weary from contortions that I have assumed to protect myself from emotional pain. To overcome these mental and physical restrictions takes an incredible amount of work and energy.

Making mistakes in daily practice is a threat—what if my mistakes are etching the wrong messages into my muscles? I feel frustrated when I cannot get the exercises right on the first try. Yet the ballet syllabus forbids us from saying that we cannot do the figures. We must try in spite of error. On a good day, my body responds to

my work, my wishes, and my will. After days of effort, something registers in my mind, and my body complies.

In spite of the difficulties, I love ballet. My mortal body tends to hunch and fidget with hypervigilance when I am tired. My true soul has good posture, graceful gestures, timely discipline, and elegance. When we stretch, I feel liberated. When we jump, I feel exhilarated. Dance to my body is like food to the starving; dance to my soul is like water to a garden.

"The Bitter Snow"

*"Far beneath the bitter snow,
Lies the seed that with the sun's love
In the Spring becomes the rose."*

—from "The Rose"

Daddy was the only child of a harsh father and a doting mother. Embittered by unresolved family problems, Daddy ridiculed Grandma Gert and resented Grandpa Joe. As soon as he graduated from high school, he enlisted in the Air Force to get away. He met and married my mother when he came home on leave after the Korean War.

Both of my parents loved the color blue. For their first Christmas Eve, they bought blue lights and blue ornaments for the Christmas tree. My father, who tried to drown his insecurities in alcohol, became violent and knocked over the tree, breaking the holiday into fragments of blue glass. My mother saw the signs of danger, but she was pregnant. Three other children followed, and she stayed in the marriage for our sake. Daddy had his good days and his good points, but patterns of verbal and physical violence continued. Under his hand, we fell like trees, breaking into splinters of wooden fear.

Daddy's disabilities and drinking problems made it hard for him to stay employed, so my mother had to support the family. When Grandma Gert became gravely ill, Daddy had to borrow money from his Aunt Elizabeth to fly home to Wisconsin. Instead of going straight to the hospital to see his mother, Daddy procrastinated and went to a local bar to drink a few beers with some old

buddies. That night Grandma Gert died, without seeing her son again. He arrived at the hospital too late to say good-bye, which added more guilt to his cup of inescapable pain.

By the time I was a senior in high school, my parents' marriage had deteriorated beyond repair. I tried to escape from the violence in our home by searching for love and truth elsewhere. Just before I graduated from high school, my quest led me to become a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the same time, my mother decided to leave my father.

When the divorce became final, Daddy moved back to Wisconsin to live with his widowed father. Hardened by old sins, bad habits, deep griefs, and stubborn grudges, Grandpa Joe and Daddy fought constantly. One Sunday night, Daddy came home very drunk from an Am-Vets picnic and suffered a stroke. He lay on the floor for two more days before Grandpa realized that he was critically ill and called an ambulance. Daddy died in the hospital a few days later. We four children attended the funeral and saw him buried in his Air Force dress blues. Grandpa fell and broke his hip the night we arrived, so he did not attend the funeral. The doctor sent him to a nursing home, and he never lived in his own house again.

A few months after Daddy's funeral, I went away to college. I lived for a year with my ninety-year-old Great-aunt Elizabeth, who taught me the names of my ancestors. She also told me about an incident she had witnessed at Grandpa Joe's house. One day, when I was just old enough to walk, my father came into the living room in a bad mood. I ran to the arms of my father as toddlers do. Instead of embracing me, Daddy hit me, knocking me down to the floor with the back of his hand.

When Great-aunt Elizabeth died, I decided to go on a mission before continuing my education. But first, I flew to Wisconsin to help Grandpa Joe settle his affairs. When he allowed me to sort out the belongings left in the family homestead, I found a troubled note in his handwriting that explained my father's last days. Grandpa's note stated that Daddy had come home from the picnic in a drunken stupor. Grandpa confessed that he yelled at Daddy to turn down the volume on the television. Daddy did not respond at all, so Grandpa hit him, knocking him down to the floor. Daddy never got up again. Grandpa wrote that he did not know that Daddy was

so ill; he wanted someone to know that he did not kill his own son. I tore up the note. Then I gathered photographs and the documents that would enable me to do the temple ordinances for my family members.

Only lately have I been able to come to terms with our history. The father who struck his children down to the floor died after his father struck him down to the floor. The Son of God, who was lifted up on the cross, descended below these things so that he could lift us all up from the dust to dance in the day of resurrection.

Blue Roses

Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord . . . and their soul shall be as a watered garden. (Jer. 31:12)

Our fifth-grade class was my first memorable exposure to talent shows and the fine arts. Kathy Murphy played "Für Elise" by Beethoven (I thought she said "Furry Leaves"). Martha Mitchell wore ballet slippers, dancing to a song by Burl Ives called "Thank Heaven for Little Girls." Another student transformed the witches' speech from *Macbeth* into a soliloquy: "Double, double, toil and trouble."

I had never read Shakespeare; I had not taken acting lessons or piano lessons. I had been enchanted by the biography of Anna Pavlova, but I had never taken ballet lessons. I did not know what to do for the talent show. My mother encouraged me to sing, so I selected a favorite folk song from the arts volume of the *Childcraft Encyclopedia*. When it was my turn, I tried to sing the words. Nothing came out but a thin expiration of terrified air. On the last chorus of the second verse, I finally managed a squeaky whisper, "On the bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond."

Notwithstanding such disappointments, in high school I took up poetry, painting, harp lessons, modern dance, and drama. When I saw a ballerina dance "The Dying Swan" on the Ed Sullivan Show, I cried like a child. I felt the stirrings of some kind of beauty within me, and I cried because I did not have a name or a face for the gift.

My exposure to the liberal arts continued with Great-aunt Elizabeth, who was a humanities scholar. Elizabeth was not a Latter-day Saint, but she admired LDS Church members because they took care of their own and had compassion on the less fortunate. She had been especially touched by the kindness of some young men at an institute dance years before. An LDS couple had invited her to be the guest speaker for a lecture series. After the lecture, there was a dance, and Elizabeth stayed to observe the young people. On the sidelines of the cultural hall, she saw a handicapped girl who could hardly walk, much less dance. Throughout the evening, all of the young men took turns asking her to dance. Elizabeth never forgot how the young woman was included.

While I lived with Aunt Elizabeth, I began to attend the institute dances. At first, I stood in the back corner of the hall, feeling shy and plain and ever so awkward. Kind brothers soon sought me out and brought me into the circle of fun and friendship. Sometimes I forgot my fears, and brothers would waltz me around the room. Sometimes I faltered, and one brother laughed me out of failure by comparing our fox-trot to the “Nephites” (knee-fights). Another brother borrowed a record player after family home evening and asked me to dance in his kitchen. I refused, even though I was secretly in love with him, because I did not want him to know my clumsiness. I was haunted when he expressed disappointment: “You don’t trust me,” he said. How could I explain that it was myself I did not trust, that unseen burdens and barriers often kept me from participating wholeheartedly in the dance of life.

That same year, I took a drama class and read *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. I cried and cried when Jim asked Laura to dance and she accepted in spite of her lameness. It was not just the dance and the broken glass unicorn and the “blue roses” that made me cry. I cried about the family pain, the fragility, the lost alcoholic father, and the faceted globe of illusions at the Paradise Dance Hall. I cried because somehow, someday, love would triumph over self-absorption, self-pity, and self-indulgence: “Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance . . . for I will turn mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them rejoice from their sorrow” (Jer. 31:13).

“The Lord of the Dance”

At a 1995 single-adult conference fireside, Elder Andrew Peterson told us to go home, bend the knees of our hearts in prayer, and crawl to the healing pool of Siloam before the Lord. If we would so humble ourselves, the Lord would have a special message of instruction for each one of us. I obeyed, prayed, and searched the scriptures for light. I was led to a message of comfort in Jeremiah 31:3-4:

Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee. Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry.

As I prayed about the scripture, I felt prompted to participate in the weekly Church dances for single adults, which I had not attended for a long time. Shortly after I began going to the dances again, I was called to be the single adult leader in our ward.

Like the Paradise Dance Hall, the Church dances seemed to be a paradox of hopes and disillusion. I liked making friends and listening to popular music. I enjoyed dancing with a Middle Eastern brother who turned me around the room in style. I liked the community spirit of country line dancing that invites all to participate whether they have a partner or not.

However, many of my single friends could not bear to go to the dances. The contrast between promised blessings and present realities can seem to be a painful joke for those who have never been married. After death or divorce takes a spouse, the spirit of loneliness can be overwhelming, notwithstanding the colored lights, the lively music, and the dressy crowds. In spite of priesthood supervision, the dances sometimes attract predators, malcontents, or even married persons out on a lark away from home.

I admire the human courage of brothers and sisters who go to the dances anyway. Some of them carry heavy burdens of disappointment and responsibility. My own losses seem small in comparison. Many single adult brothers and sisters have lost people that they knew: husbands, wives, children. How can they dance, I sometimes wonder, with such pain? Perhaps they dance because they sense that dancing is a promise. Dancing fulfills a prophecy of

deep spiritual significance. No matter what happens, Christ is the Lord of the Dance: “Let them praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with the timbrel and the harp” (Ps. 149:3).

The Red Shawl

In the October 1992 conference, Elder Merrill J. Bateman told a true story about Ann Parker, a pioneer woman in a handcart company. Her little boy had wandered away from the trail and was lost. The members of the company searched for three days for the boy and then had to move on. When Ann sent her husband, Robert, back alone to look for the child, she gave him her red shawl: “If he found him dead, he was to wrap him in the shawl; if alive, the shawl would be a flag to signal her.” Three days later, Ann saw the red shawl dancing on the horizon and slept for the first time in six days.

I thought about that red shawl of hope as I went to the temple one Friday night before the single’s dance. I sat in the chapel and searched the scriptures as if I were looking for the red shawl. In the celestial room, I noticed the red sash that Jesus wears in the portrait of his second coming. The Lord seemed to be looking at me with outstretched arms, as if to say, “This have I done for my true love.” I started to understand something.

Many pioneers lost loved ones and had to leave them behind on the trail, but through Christ their love was not in vain. Even if Robert Parker had not found his lost son, his search would not have been futile. Even if he had buried the child in the red shawl, the story would not be a tragedy. Even if Ann Parker had not seen the shawl of joy gleaming on the horizon, her prayers would not have been fruitless. Even if death had taken her beloved son, her hopes would not have been foolish.

I went from the temple to the dance, wearing a new red dress (rumor has it that women in red get more invitations to dance). I sat under the red lights, drinking red punch, listening to sentimental songs like “Lady in Red.” I waited for someone who never came, but I was not alone. For a moment, the scene was transformed from a mismatched menagerie to a gathering of quiet glory. I saw those single adults on a pioneer path, looking for loved ones like a mother searching for a dear child. Some of the sisters and brothers are out

there dancing, looking for the Lord to wave a second chance to them from the horizon. Others have buried their dreams in the red shawl, giving up the last vestiges of warmth and comfort as a sacrifice. They may sit on the side for a while, not dancing. For a small moment, they may mourn, but soon they will go forward, watching faithfully for restorations, waiting patiently for compensations.

Like all of God's children, we need not despair if the sun sets on the day without a glimpse of the red shawl. The Lord who has healed the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf will also make the lame to dance and the desolate to leap as an hart. If not now, then tomorrow will be our dancing day:

Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness; To the end that my glory may sing praise to thee, and not be silent, O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto thee for ever. (Ps. 30:11-12)

This essay was awarded third place in the 1996 BYU Studies Essay Contest. Cynthia L. Hallen is Associate Professor of Linguistics at Brigham Young University.