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I Believe in Those Who Lean

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I believe in those who lean.

Victoria Trentacoste

I believe in those who lean. As a child, I was a perfect little dancer. Poised and balanced, graceful and precise, and above all flexible. I was dancing before I even took a formal class, following my sisters around the house and copying their every move. It was no surprise that when I finally entered a class of my own I was a stand-out. Between practicing with my sisters and having an innate ability for the steps, I moved quickly to the head of my class. I was, in a word, a ballerina. I was the happiest little girl in the world.

This ‘happy little girl’ did not stick around, however, because she soon became bored. In a class where each dancer is at a different level, being the one capable of picking up on moves immediately allows for a lot of down time. While the other girls in my class would be struggling and asking to see the move again, I had already added the move to my repertoire, practiced it several times, and was now standing playing with the pins in my hair, waiting for the rest to catch up. “I don’t like going to dance class,” I found myself saying to my mom after too many classes filled with boredom. She understood but also knew how difficult it was to have such a variety of girls in the same class and tried to explain this to me. I didn’t care. I hated it. I hated dance. The perfect, little ballerina was angry and upset because her perfect, little dance world was being infiltrated by those who couldn’t keep up.

Now looking back on my attitude then, I can barely believe the horrid thoughts I had. Looking back, I realize how badly I needed the dishing of hard life I got.

Our class size dwindled as we got older and there now remained only three of us, myself included. I went on with dance. It was because I loved ballet, right? Wasn’t that what I told people? Called myself a dancer? Well, I stood miserably at the bar, class after class, and performed the exercises asked of me with no passion whatsoever. I always executed the moves as they should be executed, no correction necessary.

But suddenly, I was wrong. “Straighten your shoulders, Victoria.” I almost snarled at my ageless, British ballet teacher. She was my instructor my whole life, and my sisters’ before me. She knew me. I knew her. But I had never known her to correct me on so trivial a thing. I had been dancing ... how long? And she was telling me to correct my posture? But she had. And she continued to tell me to straighten my shoulders. I was on the brink of shouting at her that they were straight. I was doing nothing different, nothing had changed. Why was she picking on me?

But there it was. All of a sudden I had no center, and for anyone who knows ballet knows that a ballerina without her center is like a wingless bird trying to take flight. It just doesn’t work. It can not be.

Well, every class brought with it more reprimanding which, in effect, brought more frustration on my part and a greater desire to stop dancing. Finally an answer came. I had scoliosis. My spine was curved, and getting worse, which caused my shoulders to become

uneven as well as my hips. Instead of standing straight I would lean. Everything was thrown off, I couldn't dance with the same ease and grace I once had. I became angry at my teacher and angry at the world. I felt awkward and foreign in my own body, especially at night when I had to wear a brace. My whole world came crashing down. I had lost my art form. My body could no longer portray what I asked it to. Every move came out strained and pained. And so finally I did it. I quit. Good-bye dance, good bye art of the soul. Good-bye.

I got older, however, and grew into my body. My scoliosis got slightly better. I was able to ditch the brace and even though my hips and shoulders remained angled I was able to find peace with my body. Upon entering high school, an all girl's school where dance was big, I realized how much I missed that creative escape. My mother and my dance teacher had always called me a free spirit, and this free spirit had been away from its beautiful art form too long.

Delving back into the world of ballet, I was scared, and did so apprehensively. I didn't know where I stood in the class, what would be expected of me, how my body would react to the sudden relapse into posture and pointing. But I was fine. For the first time in a long time something just felt right.

Having dance taken from me brought me back. I fell in love with ballet all over again. Somewhere along the way I had lost something. I had lost that passion that once burned inside of me. The passion that put meaning behind my moves; the passion that connected me deeply and intimately to the emotions my body was evoking. The passion that I needed to breathe and live once again. I still struggle, to this day, with adjusting every move to accommodate my altered body. But I struggle. There is something fulfilling in knowing that I am overcoming something that could hold me back. That I have gotten past a part of my life where dance no longer mattered. That it was all worth the pain. Because I now have a greater respect for dance than I ever had, or could have had, before.

So I believe in those who lean. Those who aren't perfect, who struggle to keep up. I believe in those who find obstacles in their life and handle them, whether that be getting over and past those roadblocks or learning to live with and embrace them. Never again will I dance with the same effortless and picture-perfect technique that I once did. I will lean. And I have never been so glad to be so imperfect! My dance is now my own, something only my body can produce. Art is what you make of it after all. And I choose to make art with this imperfect body that leans to the side and has poor posture. Because that is the art that has the deepest meaning. The kind that has a history. My history is in my dance. Is in my art. So, I say, lean! Embrace who you are and what you produce. Because nobody can produce it quite like you, and that individuality is beautiful.