

LEARNING TO BE A CAIRN

Every day we slaughter our finest impulses. That is why we get a heart-ache when we read those lines written by the hand of a master and recognize them as our own, as the tender shoots which we stifled because we lacked the faith to believe in our own powers, our own criterion of truth and beauty. Every man, when he gets quiet, when he becomes desperately honest with himself, is capable of uttering profound truths. We all derive from the same source. There is no mystery about the origin of things. We are all part of creation, all kings, all poets, all musicians; we have only to open up, only to discover what is already there.—Henry Miller¹¹²

Those words bring me back to Saara-Maria and Teija, dance students who are learning about teaching. We sit in a dance studio in Turku, Finland, reflecting on what happens when teaching children dance. Saara-Maria and Teija speak with a kind of awe when they say, “Sometimes creativity comes right from the students; it’s like it arises from them.” *Yes*, I think, and *take care*; constructing too many exciting ways to push or pull it out of them can take away the space in which children’s creativity arises. Tricks and techniques offered to student teachers—ways to draw their own students into “being



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creative”—sometimes, without anyone noticing, get in the way of the very thing they hope to nurture.

How, then, do I help my own dance students, particularly choreography students, “be creative”? I don’t think I do help them “be creative.” I start with the belief that they *are* creative. I try to help them notice what intrigues them and trust themselves to play and follow where their own creativity leads. It’s a process of looking and listening, more than teaching—or at least more than teaching in the manner of instructing. And the looking and listening is the process we go through together. My students and I often look up from our observations with raised eyebrows and open mouths as if to say, “Huh! Who knew that was about to happen?” We may say nothing in those moments, but we do start to laugh. The mysteries are so funny.

This makes me think about Alex. At 15, she’d been dancing for 6 years, but had never choreographed and emerged a little shocked from her first choreography class. I hadn’t laid out a step-by-step procedure. I didn’t say, “Make an 8-count phrase, use three levels, and have a beginning and ending shape.” I neither gave her a theme nor asked her to name one. I might have said, “Listen to your body and notice how it wants to move.” Perhaps she improvised, following one impulse to the next and the next and the next . . . Somehow—by magic?—her body, her mind, and her creativity (that thing she’d brought with her into the studio) devised a “something.” A something for her to chew on.

In the second class, the dancer/choreographers improvised (“messing around,” I sometimes call it) while I asked from time to time, “Does somebody have a ‘What if . . .?’”, listening hard for someone to say, “What if we fell down at the end?” or “What if we couldn’t move our arms?” or whatever else they—not *I*, but *they*—thought of. Soon I asked the students to brainstorm privately some “what if” possibilities for their own work that evening. Later Alex read from her list: “What if someone else danced my phrase at the same time but reversed? Huge? Small? Slow? While making sounds? Wearing a rainbow?” She looked at the group with surprise. “What does that mean?” she asked, laughing. Yes, the mysteries make us laugh.

Lately, I picture myself as a cairn on the side of a mountain. I love stepping out of the deep woods, off a winding trail, onto a rocky mountainside, not quite sure where to go next, but with a general sense that I am at least on the mountain I meant to be on (although that’s not always true; I occasionally find myself on a different mountain than intended). Proceeding slowly, I scan the terrain and enjoy the new, open view, noticing a shape of cloud mimicking the rocky promontory just ahead. Then, with a burst of delight,

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I see, there in the distance, a small pile of stones—a cairn—telling me, “Yes, this will do.” I approach and admire the cairn’s combination of stability and delicacy. It is not a worded sign listing possible destinations and mileage, with arrows indicating steeper or gentler ways up or down the mountain. It is just a small, quiet, wordless pile of stones. I move on, chancing out another set of steps, and study my surroundings carefully, trusting that in time I will find another cairn, similar but distinct, a little ways up the mountain.

If someone has placed the cairns too close together, I am disappointed: too much information, too soon. Part of me disengages; I stop noticing the details of this place. Someone has mapped my route too tightly. My wandering now lacks a feeling of discovery and the possibility that my path differs slightly from that of those who came before or will come after.

This becomes my goal as a teacher, maybe especially in choreography: to be a cairn, just one small, quiet pile of stones that tells a student, “You’re doing fine. You choose where your next steps lead. I’m sure you’ll find another cairn along the way.”

This is not how it is usually done. I’ve been hired, after all, to “teach” choreography. Aren’t there rules for this sort of thing? Don’t students have to be taught how to deal with space and time and music and movements that will look good? Don’t they need to learn the craft first, to be shown what kinds of ideas will work, what sorts of problems are interesting, and then later—when they’re ready—they’ll find their own promising ideas? Couldn’t they—thinking again of the cairn—get frustrated wandering around or, worse, fall off the mountain? I used to think that. Then I met Allegra.

Allegra changed my life but I don’t think she knows it. About 29 years ago, she was 9 and I was a 25-year-old artist in residence, teaching dance in her public school gym in Queens, NY. Allegra asked, 20 minutes into a 45-minute class, “When do we get to dance?” My standard responses—that this *was* dance, that warming up was part of the practice, that there are many perspectives and ways to dance—were all of the rationales I’d absorbed through my own training, as a dancer and teacher. Even as I spoke, I knew I was failing her. If she didn’t feel like she was dancing from the moment she walked in the door, then I was missing something. I was not tapping into something deep and true about Allegra’s own dancing self. Something she brought with her into that space.

I went home that day distraught. It was true that we needed to warm up the body and that I should structure a developmentally appropriate progression for young dance students, engaging 25 or 30 energetic children with some semblance of control and focused, productive effort. There was truth

in my own experience and my own passions about the dance training I could offer and my expertise in sharing it. But I could not run away from Allegra's truth. Her inner guide told her this did not quite feel like dancing. And she hooked me when she tucked her frustration into the most delightful, innocent question: "When do we get to dance?"

That was it. One sweet, honest question tripped me up on my own desire for students to experience dance the way I did, love it like I did, see it like I did. I could not *not* bring those passions into the classroom; they were me, and at the essence of my teaching. But I had to learn to share the space. And if I shared the space, I had to share the power. Allegra's question gave me a new direction: What was the *least* I could do to make room for each student to discover his or her own feeling of dancing? How did the passion I brought to my own choreography resemble and differ from the passion I brought to another art I practice—the art of teaching?

Listening and Watching

I suppose Allegra was testing whether I was listening. Doing so became a key to opening the space. If I could listen well, students' passions, questions, and what I began to call "what ifs?" could shape the dance; we would start to recognize and experience the creativity hiding just below the surface. I did not come in empty-handed, but neither did the students; that belief had to walk in with me. I could no longer roll out a fully designed class not susceptible to change—change specifically provoked by students' ideas. I began to see class design as a process of selecting choreographic structures in which I and the students stayed alert for shifts—in attention, in spatial design, in energy, in timing, in just about anything we could imagine in the physical world.

My take on Allegra's challenge—to get out of her way so she could experience her own sense of dancing—applied to every class I taught, from big classes of 10-year-olds, to intimate groups of teenage choreographers like Alex, to, most recently, diverse collections of college students who may or may not be dance majors. Being a cairn meant being present and minimalist. Offering a little something, without saying or doing too much. I walked into one class with Kevin, my drummer, and said to the fourth graders, "What do you know about time, or what do you think about time? Or what do you think you know about time?" The first tender offerings focused on telling time—by clock or calendar or season—and then someone said, "Time flies." "When?" I asked. "When you're having fun," another answered. "What does

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that mean?” I asked. Before I knew it, 25 children were excitedly pondering whether time ever stopped, what would happen when they died, how reincarnation and déjà vu worked, and after about 5 minutes I said, “Well, Kevin’s going to tell you something he knows about time and he’s not going to say a word.” Kevin had not been in on my preparatory musings, but he grinned and began to play. The children gasped and began to rock to Kevin’s beat. “Oh,” they said. “Oh. That’s time too.” What a dance class we had after that.

Allegra’s question didn’t suddenly make me stop planning. In fact, planning became a more intensive process. I spent hours imagining every student and digging around in my memory for what I heard and saw in their dancing. I started hauling notebook and pen around the studio with me, scribbling notes about what students were doing, what questions they asked each other, what thoughts they expressed. Studying the notes later, I asked myself questions. When did this or that student get excited? What did he or she say, or was she mostly silent? To whom should I pay special attention so I would catch that little smile or glimmer in the eye and be able to say, “What was that, Stephanie, it looks like you had an idea?” My goal: to pay very close attention and turn the students on to themselves.

The scary part was—still is—the not knowing. “Where will this lead? Is there time?” I’ve learned that if I’m afraid, I’m probably on the right track. This part *is* like my creative struggle when making a new dance: that inner voice saying, “This will probably stink.” Taking that risk with my own artwork, I realize, involves only me. Jumping off a cliff with a group of students, though, could have heavier consequences.

It’s How I Am

Sometime around 2000, I read Seymour Sarason’s *Teaching as a Performing Art*.¹¹³ Sarason describes the work of his mentor, a visual artist and teacher, Henry Schaefer-Simmern, whose own book, *The Unfolding of Artistic Activity*,¹¹⁴ documents the extraordinary artwork of “non-artists” whom he taught in a particularly nondirective way. Schaefer-Simmern and Sarason both were committed to individuals’ innate capabilities and questioned the assumptions behind a uniform imposition of teachers’ rules. They sounded like kindred cairns, inspiring me to go further out on the edge of my thinking about students’ choreographic capabilities. By chance, soon after discovering these works, I was invited to try some of my ideas with a very small group of teenage choreographers in a program called Young Masters.¹¹⁵

I had been taught to begin with improvisation, followed or accompanied by training in compositional forms, after which comes choreography, when students get to make “real” dances. That is stated too simply. Still, the overall concept is that improvisation opens a creative channel to use when learning compositional rules and then it all comes together in the choreographic process for which students have been well prepared. I kept getting hung up on a variation of Allegra’s question: Who gets to have the idea?

In most improvisation classes, a teacher poses prompts, side-coaching students who physically explore the ideas, imagery, or limitations the teacher offers. Improvisations often follow game structures or “scores” and are designed as open-ended, creative explorations. Students don’t usually propose the prompt, nor do they side-coach or direct other students’ explorations. Although students improvising to a teacher’s prompts do experience certain creativity, if they never initiate or direct, the teacher remains in command and, thus, holds the creative reins. Alane Starko, writing about visual arts teaching, says, “Rather than shielding students from the frustration of seeking ideas, teacher-structured problems rob students of the art making process: looking for ideas; choosing materials, tools, and forms; visualizing a variety of possibilities.”¹¹⁶ Starko talks about problem finding, not just problem solving; this was where I wanted to go.

I checked my thinking with friends from college. Was there a missing link in our education, wonderful though it had been? Had our training—to respond to improvisational commands and construct compositional studies along a uniform progression—accidentally overlooked what we might have offered: interesting problems or intuitions that the existing structures didn’t accommodate? Did inattention to our own impulses make us stifle some tender shoots long ago? One of my old friends nodded and said softly, “Yeah, I got an MFA but I can’t say I ever really knew what *I* wanted to say with my dances.” I longed to find a different way in with the Young Masters choreographers.

The first day of the experiment, I rode the subway to the studio, nervous about my plan for the 2-hour class. I intended to ask Anna, Lydia, and Indira, the only choreographers who had enrolled in Young Masters thus far, to create a “something,” then to show and discuss the work, and to identify their own goals for the course. I had narrowed the tasks no further. My training suggested I offer a starting place—a theme or a concept, some structure for them to follow. Out on the mountainside, one might erect the occasional signpost saying something like, “If I were you, I’d turn left here. You don’t

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have to, but *I* might do that, based on *my* experience with this trail.” I was working hard to try another way, to be a cairn.

As the train pulled into the stop before mine, a woman rose and stood by the door. I was surprised the woman beside her didn’t rise also; I had thought they were together. Just before the train arrived at the station, the standing woman said to her seated friend, “You’re going to stay there until the doors open?” The friend nodded and said with a shrug, “It’s how I am.” The train stopped, the doors opened, and the seated woman stood, following her companion onto the platform, both women gently laughing. I laughed too; they’d given me the idea I’d been looking for.

In the studio, I met the three choreographers and we talked briefly about goals. Then I told them my subway story and said, “So that’s it—‘It’s How I Am.’ Whatever that means to you. How much time do you need?” Anna suggested half an hour and the others agreed. Then Lydia said, “Do I have to *think* about ‘how I am’ to create the dance, or could I just start to move?” “Great question,” I said. “Moving can be a beginning. Follow wherever that leads.”

The three dances made that day were startlingly different from one another; each choreographer found form, process, and content that seemed necessary to her own creation. Picturing those dances now, nearly a decade later, I see them whole, each with its own rhythmic, spatial, and dynamic structure and growing out of the “am”ness of each young artist. What those students and others created over the next 3 years changed my understanding and my process. David Bohm wrote about an artist creating “his own order of necessity. Different parts of the form he is making must have an inner necessity or else the thing has not really much of a value.”¹¹⁷ I did not arrive empty-handed to my first meeting with the three teenage choreographers. Nor did they.

Going to College

Teaching at a college upped the ante. After teaching technique for three semesters, I was invited to teach improvisation in an undergraduate dance program in the fall of 2011, 4 years after the end of the Young Masters experiment. I read up on different universities’ approaches to the choreographic process to see if anything had changed since my undergrad experience. Studying course descriptions and articles in professional dance education journals, I was struck by the uniformity of the choreographic progression

described: improvisation (with primarily professor-designed prompts, I'm guessing), composition, and, at long last, choreography. The dance education field seemed quite certain this model was still best. I thought of Ben Shahn, recalling a young poet who had given up writing poetry because in college he discovered that "there's so much that you have to know before you can write poetry. There are so many forms that you have to master first." Shahn wondered,

whether it was made clear to him that all poetic forms have derived from practice; that in the very act of writing poetry he was, however crudely, beginning to create form. I wonder whether it was pointed out to him that form is an instrument, not a tyrant.¹¹⁸

As I prepared to teach improv, I realized there was no turning back; I had to see if my approach would work on a bigger mountainside. Now, instead of three or six or eight teenage girls dedicated to dancing and to each other, I would face college students who had enrolled for a host of reasons, including, for some, that it was a requirement for the dance major. Nearly 20 of them, ranging in age from 19 to 37, with vastly different experiences in dance—from some who had barely taken a dance class to those who had had professional dance careers—filled the roster, all of them essentially new to improvisation. And instead of 2 or 3 hours for each session, this would be a 50-minute class, three times a week. With grades. Ready? Jump.

The first class assignment, due the next day, was to write an honest answer to two questions: (a) What do you hope to get out of this course? and (b) What will you have to bring in order to get that out of it? Every student returned the next day with a response, as did I. Most were handwritten and each told me something valuable. I was already learning what made my students tick. In the fourth class, at the beginning of week 2, I threw the improvisers into one of the simplest structures I've found to trigger a series of "what if?" questions. Twenty students count off around a circle, from 1 to 10 and 1 to 10 again, to create pairs who share a number across the circle. Silently, without visible or audible cue, the dancers, in order from 1 to 10, change places on the circle—1s, 2s, 3s, etc. Each pair must feel the moment to change. That's it. My job is to watch and to listen. Always—always—something shifts and people notice. A near collision, a change of energy or timing, an unexpected relationship and the implication of a narrative—people notice and gasp and laugh and say, "Oh." That's when I say, "What? What happened? What do you want to do next?" In that simple, minimal structure, students start tun-

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ing in to their innate understanding of form, noticing what intrigues them in action, and saying things others hadn't thought of. They begin to notice what already exists in their imaginations and bodies to manipulate space, time, dynamics, and other choreographic structures. My almost wordless message to my students: "You have it within you."

Sometimes, out on the mountain, you see a pile of rocks that's just a pile of rocks. You move toward it because you think it's a cairn. You gradually realize that it's not a cairn, but also that it brought you to an interesting place you wouldn't have otherwise gone. One day, I asked the students in my improvisation course to start with breath and heartbeat, seeing where that led. I watched Neela, pressed against the wall, barely moving, looking grim. Inside, I panicked. I wrote myself notes: "Neela looks frustrated. It does look a little like a loony-bin. People are rocking like Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*. Oh no." I contemplated stepping in, offering a new path, jolting them out of their go-nowhere breath/beat explorations. Then I remembered a colleague leading a workshop about "chance dances," tossing coins on the floor to establish, by chance, where the dancers' starting positions would be. Except she didn't like where the pennies had fallen, so she scooped them up and said, "That's no good—let's try again." No, I couldn't jettison this empty-looking wandering; I would have to live through the pain of it. I scribbled on and remembered something Lawrence Stenhouse wrote: "Through self-monitoring, the teacher becomes a conscious artist. Through conscious art he is able to use himself as an instrument in his research."¹¹⁹

I made a note to lead a reflection in the next class so students might air their frustrations about the open-ended structure and subsequent lack of inspiration. I prepared to apologize to Neela for putting her through that undirected tedium. It hadn't been a cairn. It was just a pile of rocks.

But when Neela spoke the next morning, she took me where she'd been—a place I couldn't actually see from the outside.

I feel like the beginning yesterday was made just for me. I had a horrible morning and didn't want to dance. And you said to just focus on our breath and our heartbeats. I noticed myself start to change. What I was feeling on the inside shifted to the outside and started to move. When we were done, I was in a new place—and I realized my own breath had gotten me there.

Others had different experiences, of course. Molly, for example, never found her pulse, so finally she gave up and started to go with others' rhythms,

which she described as fun, “like changing personalities.” Steven spoke of becoming obsessed with the smallest motion of his toes. I listened. When I finally spoke, I was laughing. First I read from my notes: how unsatisfying the improv had appeared, how like a loony-bin. Then I told Neela I’d planned to apologize for putting her through that. She stared, wide-eyed. Eyebrows raised, mouths open, we thought but didn’t say, “Huh! Who knew that was about to happen?” The mysteries are so funny.

Choreographic Projects: Facing the Fear

A year after teaching that course, I was asked to direct the dance program’s Choreographic Projects. I said it was impossible: 29 choreographers in 50-minute classes, three times a week. It was nuts. Too many artists, too little time for each one’s problem finding in the process of creating 29 distinct group works. I couldn’t run away from the challenge.

There was a lot of fear in the room. My own fear about failing at what I’d declared was impossible. My students’ fears; most had never choreographed a group work and were holding in their heads all of the composition rules they’d learned while making solo works the previous spring. And the fears of my colleagues, who, having entrusted me with this mission, had their own anxieties. What, after all, could emerge from a class led by someone who just wanted to arrange some rocks along a mountain trail? How would these choreographers learn how to make good dances if I didn’t steadily point them in the right direction, calling out mileage and indicating better routes from time to time? If I insisted, as I did, that my job was not to *fix* the works, but rather to have the students study their own work, find questions, and conduct experiments, how would we explain ourselves to a paying audience? Previous concerts, directed toward a modern dance aesthetic and subjected to costuming and music approval by the faculty, had been presented as essentially “finished” products. This concert, too, would undoubtedly be taken as a reflection of the faculty’s skill in developing accomplished artists; what faculty member wouldn’t be nervous? How many people was I willing to drag up the mountain trail with me? All of them.

The hard part of being a cairn is being as watchful and patient as you need to be. People approach and you think, “Yes, yes, this is good.” Then they start to veer off because they see some odd rock formation or tree branch over your left shoulder and you think, “Uh-oh. You are definitely headed off a cliff there.” But you can’t really say anything. You can concentrate your energy: Be

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more present, more solid, perhaps, so that after an explorer has spent a little time looking at something interesting, he or she will become aware again that you are there and that another promising pile of rocks might sit somewhere nearby.

This is where it gets tricky, as an artist who also teaches, to know which part of the art you're in: making your own choreography (or painting or poem or film) or making your own teaching. The intuitive visions kick in no matter what. But there's a difference. When you're looking at another artist's work thinking, "Wouldn't it be great if they huddled in the corner a little longer and then maybe one person bursts out first? Or how about you use this piece of music—I *love* this piece of music—this would be *perfect!*", little red flags should be popping up all through your consciousness. Those would be your art ideas—seeded with a student's beginnings. Those responses can't—and shouldn't—be shut off; you're seeing something, being inspired. Write that down in your notebook—and then focus your attention on that artist over there and what's taking shape under her hands. What is she saying or not saying? Can you tell what she's thinking about? Are you puzzled, intrigued, frustrated? How is she working with her dancers or the materials? What problem is she trying to solve? That's how my notes look when I'm thick in the art of teaching. It's not a different process, but it is a different intent. It's also a different content: student's work, not mine.

As a cairn, I should be honest. I shouldn't scatter myself into the brush and see if my students can find their way alone. I plant myself at the edge of the studio and watch, intently. I take notes. I write down what choreographers say and read it back to them later, asking, "Did you know you said that?"

In the moment, my questions are usually echoes. "How do the opposite rolls look?" Joan asks. "How do the opposite rolls look?" I ask back. She wants to strangle me. "I can't see!" she says, infuriated. "Why can't you see?" I ask. "I don't know!" she wails. "How will you see?" I say. Now she pauses. "Maybe . . ." She chews a fingernail. "Maybe," she goes on, "they have to roll the same way, then opposite, and then I can compare." The dancers experiment while she side-coaches again and again. At last Joan cries, "I know what it is. I figured it out! There you go, now it looks like something."

If a student doesn't ask a question, it's on me. "Give me an example," my friend Fran, a dean at a school of education, said as I described the process to her over dinner one night. I offered this: "Is the ending taking the time you want it to take?"

“That’s a terrible question,” Fran said. “It’s a yes or no question. I’d ask the student to explain why it’s taking that time, so she’ll understand her choices better.”

“I don’t want her to explain,” I said. “I want her to look.” Fran’s automatic rejection of a “yes/no” question had an educator’s rationale. I wanted students to stay in the artistic process. Asking them to explain—particularly to someone in power—would take them out of the artistic process. They would begin rationalizing. As we talked, I realized that explaining was helping me—in *this* situation. But if Fran asked me to explain my choreography while I was in the midst of it, I’d refuse. What student—pressed by a teacher—would claim that right for herself?

Fran asked why I didn’t just suggest the student look at the ending; why pose a question? “It’s the quality of a suggestion,” I said. “She’d start trying to figure out what *I* thought was wrong. Asking if the ending does what she wants keeps me out of it. I could have asked something else, like ‘Does the end happen where you want it in space?’” Before posing any questions, I told Fran, I tell students not to answer, to just look and take notes, and to disregard questions that aren’t useful. Suggestions have a different power. Where the questions lead is none of my business. We sit together in the art of it, following where it goes. Listen. Play it back. Watch. Ask a question. Be still. Trust.

Trusting myself can be harder than trusting students. As Jen rehearsed her trio, I puzzled over the opening shape—dancers’ arms flung overhead. Wanting to ask, “Why are their arms up there?” I instead wrote in my journal. I wondered how to help Jen focus on the opening without saying, “I think the arms are weird.” I asked Jen if I could address her dancers. “Before you start, is there anything you’re confused about?” They identified a problem with counts. Nothing about arms. While Jen clarified counts, I wrote my disappointment: “Nobody confused by arms.”

Soon Jen cued the dancers, then stopped. “Wait a second. Now *I’m* confused. What’s that arm doing up there?” Jen guided her dancers through a number of experiments with different arm motions, finally saying, “Try that.” We watched her revised opening and she clapped her hands, delighted. “That’s so much better!” she cried. “I fixed it!”

Baffled, I also felt guilty. Talking with my partner Barry [Oreck] later, I worried that I’d unintentionally manipulated Jen to deal with *my* problem, not hers. “I’m not sure why I asked the dancers about being confused. I was desperate.” Barry listened, then said, “Maybe it was intuitive. You turned to the material—the dancers—instead of the choreographer and helped Jen

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look at the work from inside. Maybe digging into it, instead of thinking about it, gave her time to wonder if anything confused *her*.”

Barry set out a cairn, reminding me how much of value happens on an unconscious level. All I “knew” was to let the writing slow me down and to stay out of it when the dancers’ problem differed from mine. I like to think that if the arms had remained “weird,” that would have been all right too. Looking back, Jen’s discovery of her power to make her piece “better” according to her own criteria was the prize. It was what Schaefer-Simmern might say was evidence of artistic unfolding.

Who Shouldn’t Be There?

I taught improvisation along with choreography that semester. Lee, a senior pharmacology major, had not danced since her childhood in Korea and saw this as her last chance to dance in college. Enrolled in the beginning level technique class—a prerequisite for improv—she came to improv through a scheduling miscommunication. By the time we figured it out, she was committed to our improvisation class and we to her. I skirted around the rules and Lee stayed.

On the day of Lee’s “what if”—a day every slightly petrified improv student faced, charged with directing half the class through an improvisation he or she had designed while the other half watched—she rose and took a deep breath. In halting English, she said, “I want—watch my hands.” She started to delicately paint the air. Immediately the dancers on stage mirrored her gestures. Lee stopped, dropping her chin to her chest. She took another breath. “No,” she said. “How can I say?” Slowly she moved her hands again. The dancers on stage watched, rapt, and then, almost as one, smiled, nodded, and began to move, independent of one another, each responding uniquely to Lee’s hands. Dancers traveled, dropped to the ground, reached and spun, each finding his or her own way to interpret Lee’s intent. As they moved, her hands changed; she picked up on dancers’ actions and experimented with new gestures, watching the result and shifting again. The cringe I felt initially (“Oh dear, a miming conductor routine”) eased as I opened my eyes to the beauty taking shape. This was like an improv teacher’s side-coaching. But it was a student, not a teacher, and she had found another language for leading. Those watching, puzzled at first, turned to each other, asking, “What? How?” Soon they, too, began to smile and say, “Oh, oh . . .”

At the end of this silent, breathtaking symphony of motion, Lee as conductor and dancers as her instruments found stillness. Every dancer in the audience and on stage erupted with an ecstatic cheer, on their feet, applauding the most extraordinary improvisation of the semester. Lee stood speechless, hands to her mouth: What had she done? Stunned, I tried not to cry, aware of my power as a teacher and that my own celebration or emotion might suggest this was the kind of work the other 18 should have been doing all along—a message I didn't want to send. How does a cairn silently cheer?

Every student in conference with me after that day mentioned Lee's improv and how it had changed them. Lee too, spoke of being transformed. "I made it up," she said, "because my English is no good. I asked myself, 'How can I say what I want to say?' I went home that day to my aunt and told her everything. She was so proud. It changed everything. I think now I am a dancer." Lee was the one student who did not have the prerequisite, who was not "qualified" to be in that class.

There is no way to know, teaching this way, if you really get it "right." There are signs though. Anna, of the Young Masters experiment, said when it was all over, "It really felt like it was ours, that it had emerged from something we already had inside of us—not that it had been "taught."¹²⁰ That small cairn continues to beckon me forward.

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Endnotes

- 112 See Miller, 1964, p. 25.
- 113 See Sarason, 1999.
- 114 See Schaefer-Simmern, 1948.
- 115 See Oreck & Nicoll, 2010.
- 116 See Starko, 1995, p. 129.
- 117 See Bohm, 1996, p. 27.
- 118 See Shahn, 1965, p. 19.
- 119 See Stenhouse, 1985, p. 16.
- 120 See Oreck & Nicoll, 2010, p. 119.