



## Dance and Desire

Margie Gillis

### ABSTRACT

The author describes her lifetime relationship with dance and how it has touched every aspect of her life—physical, spiritual and emotional. The control and discipline methods of teaching dance when she was a child were ill suited to her curiosity and creativity. This curiosity and her “soul’s yearning” have led her to explore dance as a source of knowledge, expression, exploration, communication and soul connection. As a teacher of dance, she describes how it is important to encourage her students to explore their relationship to themselves in dance. Lastly, she gives uplifting guidelines to inspire both teachers and readers.

## Learning and Dance: Dancing From the Inside Out

**T**he society we live in pulls and pushes us to consume, achieve and accomplish. Yet our outward expression is only as potent as its rootedness within. Dance is expression that engages all of who we are, connecting inner and outer and yielding questions like... Who is dancing? What is being danced? What is the experience of being and how do we communicate and transform? How do we learn, change, shift, value, understand, connect, explore, and can we truly share what it is to be human?

Why dance? Because dance is nature. Dance is thought/intellect, emotion, and spirit/soul sparked through the nervous system; connected to nature. It is experiential, humanly complete, transformational and a pure knowledge. I use the words “pure knowledge” here to express that sense of connected knowingness or soul

connection, when all aspects of our conscious selves come into relationship and congruency with a sense of source.

I have had the joy to have a lifetime relationship with expression, exploration and communication through dance. When I began to dance at age three the dominant dance training was a prescribed set of exercises that one used control and discipline to achieve. The ideas were presented in a “sport” or simple goal format. This attitude of mastery over Nature was rampant in the world in general in the 1950s. Nature was something to be conquered and/or paved over. A shape was presented and one was encouraged to control oneself in order to achieve the shape...then on to the next. One followed the shapes as presented by a teacher then on to a choreographer’s direction. Artistic expression was the domain of providence and temperament. Emotion was suspect, as it led to wildness and lack of control.

But it was here, in this wildness, that my heart was at home. Wildness of thought, feeling and motion. For me dance was a way to experience and understand life, to connect with a sense of “soul singing,” something eternal, ecstatic, and yet so tenderly human it could break the heart open. I could use the dance to fully know, to question and to experiment with the experiences of life that came to or through my awareness.

Relationship with my neuromuscular system became an intimate love affair as I spent time understanding the nature of the inner “cinema” or “landscape” and how it was made muscle, how it was physicalized. I have endless curiosity for the miracle of thought, emotion, and spirituality becoming flesh. I am eternally grateful for the wisdom of the body as my guide and teacher. I experience great joy in the infinite nuances of idea that can be purely expressed. The full experience, as energy runs the path of the nerves, touching the muscle and causing an orchestra of contractions and releases that can manifest as outward motion or be experienced as “under the skin” or “feelings.” This is “natural” dance that we socially have learned to suppress. This is the connection to “source.”

When I was young I was looking for something that did not, or seemed not to, exist in the world outside me. Something drew me that I could hardly name. How to pay attention to this call when it was not reflected back to me in the dance classes or the educational institutes I had access to, nor indeed, in the world as I knew it. I could only be brave and curious and follow this soul’s yearning, believing as I did, that if it was not already in the world or even in myself, it should and could be. I have had the joy of following a unique path and feel honored and grateful to have been embraced with an incredible career performing, dancing, and choreographing.

The logical sequence was “how can I teach others to do this?” As I aged I began to understand how to teach, share and draw others towards their own relationship with their nature, their life in motion, manifestation and Dance. In other words, to experience the miracle of who we are in a fuller dimension. My Teaching has embraced working with professional dancers at the peak of their careers as well as children, non-dancers, actors and those with a focus on physiological and physical health. Knowing that desire, a thirst for knowing, is the greater teacher, I have focused on inspiring my students to their find their own curiosity, to learn how to safely expand their parameters, to engage their desire to explore and to deepen their experience and understanding of themselves in motion. It is indeed a great joy to see my students renew their love of life and dance and apply these explorations to their diverse personal and professional lives.

There is something so true, congruent and remarkable about experiential knowledge. This is where we really can initiate and make our profound shifts in life. For indeed we are alive. We are alive in a world that is now threatened with extinction. That we have become so abstract and disrespectful of nature and our own nature; that we are now capable of annihilation; seems to me a symptom of distance from our full embodied self, our nature and how that nature is a part of, connected to, a larger nature.

I now teach this approach to dance, to life’s interconnection with dance and experiential exploration. No surprise: I am very passionate about it. I create games/dances/constructed improvisations, based on the needs (as I perceive them or as I am requested) that allow the participants to explore their relationship with themselves in dance, in motion. Below are some of the basic element guidelines for me as a teacher, instigator, and/or guide. These are listed to give a sense, a feel, of where I come from. It is my hope to inspire the reader to reflect on his or her own investigation and relationship in motion, and in life, to these starting points.

Health is the basic guideline—exploration of what health means; elaboration follows from there.

Curiosity, necessity, desire, love, humility, perseverance, courage

Respect, for self and others in partnering and audience (ritualized) communication (use the airline wisdom: put your own face mask on before assisting others)

Listening with all senses and instinct and responding, or rather releasing a response in motion

Compassion will help solve most dilemmas

The more you do the more you master

To follow the Idea? Experiences, letting the idea tell you how to move

Allowing oneself to shift into the witness position, avoiding the critic position

The problem holds the solution

If you do not “know it,” invent it. Allow yourself to manifest your own unique experience of the subject...any subject/word/state of being

Being open to the unexpected

Who you are and who you are becoming—held in relation, not as combative focuses

Building a relationship with risk from the ground up. Learning how to fall safely

Many secondary skills are learned-acquired, by following one’s Bliss or vision

Curiosity for the total experience of life, our interior landscape of experience and how we bring that to a manifestation. Predominantly in the miracle of nature/dance

Source, transformation, essential, nature, life, health, compassion in motion, the experience of life, Love...and how all of these become “life” in dance

Holding the work inside oneself. Embodying the idea or experience

Observing. Knowing that the observer is changed by the observed

Exploring qualities, nuances

Listening, observing, open attention, curiosity—the greater love is being heard

Instigating, suggesting

Supporting, guiding, give feedback

Inspiring

Desire looks a lot like discipline on the outside but is the deeper learning skill

As I write this I have begun collaborations on two books. The first book, with Michelle LeBaron—friend, celebratory dancer, humanist, poetess, Professor of Law, Director of the Program on Dispute Resolution at the University of British Columbia—is on the uses of dance and my particular methods in relationship to where they may be useful to those engaged in conflict resolution. The second book, with Eleanor Duckworth—dancer, friend, humanist and Harvard Professor of Education—is about my process in the hopes of sharing that information more keenly with dancers with a particular focus on dance professionals.

“What I Love about Dance is that it is a litmus test for being. It is truthful, it tells you, at each moment, who truly you are. It does not lie. It employs every aspect of one’s self, every bit of you, in a way that no other art form does. [My intellect, body emotion and spirit].”<sup>1</sup> — Christopher Gillis<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

1. This quotation is a remembrance of what Chris said. He said it in many different ways at many times; this is my memory’s composite.
2. Christopher Gillis was a noted modern dancer and choreographer who worked with the Paul Taylor Dance Company as well as many other groups. He regularly collaborated with his sister Margie.

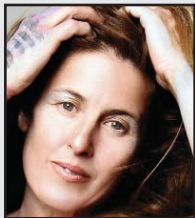


Photo Credit:  
Tamara Fiset

**Margie Gillis** is an accomplished and socially active dancer who performs and organizes workshops at the Margie Gillis Dance Foundation in Montreal and across the world. Gillis' art and life are both brimming with energy, creativity and spirituality. Gillis' passion for dance began at an early age and quickly blossomed, aided by her teachers and an inherent love for her art. Over the course of her career Gillis has danced with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, National Ballet of Canada, and many others. Some of Gillis' most notable achievements include receiving the MAD Spirit Award from the Stella Adler Studio of New York for her social justice work and being the first modern dancer to be awarded the Order of Canada. Last year, she was also appointed Chevalière de l'Ordre du Québec. Social causes are close to her heart: she supports OXFAM, Planned Parenthood Foundation, and actively participates in the fight against AIDS.

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