

Dancing while Aging **Glenna Batson**

“every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” Walt Whitman

Dance has been a primary mover in shaping my life. Some of my earliest memories are of dancing at my mother’s school, the Modern School of Dance Education. Between the years 1935 and 1950, she danced with Ruth St. Denis and Hanya Holm, dancers whose legacies I carry with me to this day. In the 1960s, when I was considering a dance career, the field was strictly defined and proscribed: You could be a dance artist, teacher, or choreographer. Lacking the talent and psychological wherewithal to become a dance artist, I still needed to find ways to weave dance into my life. Four decades later, I’ve managed to carve out a trans-disciplinary career as a scholar/educator at the interface of dance, science, and Somatics.

The phenomenon of the “older dancer” surfaced sometime in the middle of the twentieth century. From the 1960s on, many aging artists honed improvisational practices that offered new ways of accommodating the needs of older artists (e.g., Anna Halprin, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, Lisa Nelson, and Simon Forti). Liz Lerman’s *Dancers of the Third Age* appeared on the world stage in the early 1980s.

Today’s current trend toward dance-for-all has helped dispel stereotypes surrounding who can and cannot dance and added significantly to many people’s quality of life. Dance also has become the muse of neuroscientists who attest to the many benefits that dance confers on health.¹ But where dance is concerned, health is not my primary focus. I dance for many of the same reasons that motivated me more than half a century ago: to sharpen my mental and physical acumen in polishing a phrase, to partner with memory in telling my life’s story, to practice “distributed creativity”² by dancing in community with other dancers, and simply to recognize that I embody a living continuum of change. I am not an “aging dancer,” but a person who is dancing *while* aging. If we dancers could invite a few neuroscientists to dance with us in the studio, it would be clear to them that to study aging means to grasp the unity of body, mind, and spirit, moving in homage to all that is human.

Two years ago, I joined a local community class organized by a 73-year old dancer/choreographer from the Limon tradition of modern dance. Experienced and novice movers alike flocked to it. I thought I had found my bliss – a path into structured dance that posed an appropriate technical challenge without making excessive physical demands; a place where the advantages of my past training stroked my ego while the lyrical aesthetic strummed my heartstrings. But my real excitement lay in the joy of dancing with others, in a community of dancers where the playing field had been leveled. Within months of starting the class, I joined its non-profit offshoot, a platform for dance performance. I never imagined that at this age I would find myself performing before a paying audience without apology.

The path of aging is unique to each person. So, am I truly celebrating and supporting this diversity of the aging trajectory? Such participation has evoked a need to look beyond ego and reflect on my dancing itself – to hone a discerning critique, rather than lusting after technical skill, as I did at an earlier age.

Many questions arise as I seek to redefine risk-without-recklessness. Take balance, for example, a double-edged sword at this stage. On one hand, I find myself “failing” in a phrase, tripping over myself, nearly falling, arriving behind the beat, fumbling through changing levels. On the other, my fallibility actually stimulates new movement pathways and helps me develop new skills. In allowing this to happen, I am stretching the boundaries of ‘normal,’ age-acceptable movement and celebrating difference rather than compensating for it.

But more: Am I in compassionate dialogue with myself and others? Am I guilty of acting out of the same widespread political and cultural forces that minimize and marginalize others? How might I be continuing to strain in ways that are actually ageist? And, am I engaging in a form of that contributes to the communal good, or simply dancing for myself? Am I being honest in exposing my vulnerability? Or, am I still competing with an earlier version of myself in some fantasy quest for youth? And finally, are the structures I build as a teacher and community dancer, process-oriented, dynamic, and open to change – leading to longer-term enriching artistic practice – not just giving me a chance to appear on stage?

To dance is to express all that is human – embodied, empathic, uncertain, fallible, and interdependent. Dance has always been a means of practicing agency, autonomy and activism. But above all, dance is part of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called, our “inescapable network of mutuality.” For this, I dance: I am a human being who continues to dance for the art and heart of it - to translate and transmit an embodied legacy across generations, to continue to ask the questions that arise in the brilliant palette of hues that a collective experience brings.

1. In one recent study on aging, results from dance exceeded other forms of exercise in maintaining brain health. Rehfeld, K, Lüders, A, Hökelmann A, et al (2018). Dance training is superior to repetitive physical exercise in inducing brain plasticity in the elderly. *PLoS One*. 2018; 13(7): e0196636. Published online 2018 Jul 11. doi: [10.1371/journal.pone.0196636](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0196636)
2. The term ‘distributed agency’ was popularized by Kirsh, D. (2009), Choreographic methods for creating novel, high quality dance. *Proceedings of the 5th International Workshop on Design and Semantics of Form and Movement*, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/afb9/4fa04d69b969b858cd5467b6baaf88107fc9.pdf>

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For four decades, Glenna’s contributions to dance have been trans-disciplinary. She has generated many projects through multiple channels, both formal and informal, as teacher, researcher, performer, and advocate. Each of her projects reflects a confluence of dance, science, philosophy, creative process, and mind-body practices (Somatics). Recent highlights include pioneering research in dance and Parkinson’s, Human Origami (creative practice research in the art and science of body folding), and teaching internationally as a Fulbright Senior Specialist in dance. Her writings include numerous articles and two books, *Body and Mind in Motion*, *Dance and Neuroscience in Conversation* (author), and *Dance, Somatics and Spiritualities: Contemporary Sacred Narratives* (editor and contributor). Glenna’s mantra: Embodied, empathic, emergent, and inclusive, dance effects change from both the inside out and the outside in. Find Glenna on Facebook or www.humanorigami.com

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