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Windows and Mirrors Essay

### **What?**

Believe it or not, I'm a dancer. Yep...fat guys can dance too!! In fact, I even have a dance minor from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. My learning experience is from much earlier on in my dance career though. It's a story I share with my casts every time I choreograph a show. It not only breaks the tension of the group, it helps those who might be scared because they aren't dancers be more confident, and helps them look through my own window, and immediately builds trust between us. It also doesn't hurt that it's a little funny.

I started dance way back in second grade. I was a chubby kid. I had a bitchin' mullet with spiky blonde hair on top and long curly locks that flowed almost to the middle of my back. I was real proud of it! For some odd reason, our instructor had indicated to our parents that we needed to have pants we could move and dance in; so my mom fulfilled her motherly duties, ignorant as she was of the unintended consequences, and purchased me a pair of spandexy-stretchy aerobics pants. Not just black either. These pants were classic late 80's fashion; bright neon stripes on the sides, an elastic drawstring waist, and even stirrups on the bottom. To complete the outfit, I had a bright neon green shirt that complemented the pants that I had paired with a brand new pair of white tube socks that were under the stirrups of course. Oh, I forgot to mention, second grade was also the year I got glasses. Not small ones either; GIANT glasses that appeared as if they might overtake my face.

While tap is my favorite genre now, and has been for many years, it didn't come naturally to me. I remember those early days of tap class. I loved the sound of the shoes, the feel of the taps hitting the floor and reverberating through my body. It was like being a drummer with my feet! Most of the basics came without too much trouble, shuffles, flaps, buffalos etc. One very important step, integral to tap dance, and pretty much a staple in every tap dance, eluded me – the time step.

The time step is just what it sounds like, a way to keep time, or the beat, while tapping. It comes in countless forms, and is performed in hundreds of ways, sometimes unrecognizable. Our task was to master the step in its most basic form – a one bock time step. Step by step it goes: stomp (or bock), hop shuffle step, flap ball change, and then repeat on opposite foot. While I was able to master each of these components individually, the weight shifting necessary for completing them together did not come to me as readily. I remember getting extremely frustrated as I watched the 3 other boys in my class complete the step with ease, and then continue to repeat it incessantly, speeding up each time, mastering the step.

One other thing you should know is that still to this day when I get really frustrated, I don't get angry...I cry. And so, came the tears. Not just tears though. The ugly cry. I've never been able to cry any other way. It's always the ugly cry with me; contorted, beat red face, runny nose and even a little drool. There it was, staring back at me, reflected in the giant 8 foot tall mirror in front of me; the chubby, spandex clad "Joe dirt" with a beat red face, sobbing uncontrollably. My dance teacher, Candy...Candy King...yep really, approached me. Candy was not only a woman that was larger than life in personality, but also stature. A portly woman, who was very

light on her feet, and had once been a Vegas showgirl had now opened her own studio in the small town of Circle Pines and made it her mission to teach anyone and everyone...especially the boys. Not for any weird way, but because she was sort of a tom-boy, and related better to us, and that way, too, she could remain the center of attention as the only woman in the room. Candy approached me and asked how I was doing and how she could help. While for most people, this would be comforting, for me it was mortifying, and just induced more snot and drool. She wrapped her arms around me and pulled my wet face right into her chest...her bosom...her giant bosom. Trying to console me with everything she could. Finally something she said resonated with me, and still does to this day. She said, "Sometimes you just have to leave the step and come back to it next time...give it time to live in your body, and then it will just come to you." This is something I make sure to reiterate to all my students, no matter what genre of dance we are working in. It has stuck with me for 25 years. It's one of the most important lessons I learned early on in my dance career.

As my face departed her bosom, she took my hand as we both looked in the mirror. "I remember I had the same trouble when I first started. I was never the thin girl, the attractive girl, or the best dancer...I had to work for it. Every time I stepped on to the floor I had to look in the mirror and tell the chubby girl that she could do it because she loved it, and that's all that mattered!" She then walked away and continued teaching the class.

The next week it was the first thing we worked on. I approached the mirror, looked at the chubby kid in the spandex pants, and willed him to master the step. I began, stomp, hop shuffle step, flap ball change, then very slowly moved to the opposite foot and began again. Slowly but

surely it was coming to me...without having practiced it at all for a week. It had lived in my body and begun to grow. I could do it, and kept doing it until Candy came over and smiled at me, and told me we were moving on. We both knew she didn't need to do anything more than smile. We both knew my success was enough satisfaction that no words needed to be said out loud.

### **So What?**

I now understand that Candy was allowing me to look through her window to see her reflection, which was a model for my own observations of myself. She helped me understand that my size or shape didn't matter, that my clothes didn't matter, and that even when things don't come naturally, we can still be successful whether through practice or "just letting things rest." I was able to peer through her window and see her reality, which, in turn affected how I perceived myself while looking in my own mirror. Furthermore, grasping my hand and looking in the mirror, both literally and figuratively, was incredibly motivating, empathetic and compassionate. It has served as a model for the relationships I have with my own students to this day, in every situation.

### **Now What?**

I hope that allowing my students to peer through my window, into my childhood, helps them see what I see reflected in my mirror, and that it affects their own reflections. It helps break down the barriers of self-consciousness, athleticism, coordination, intimidation, and so many others. It gives students a model and example. It lowers the bar of expectations they have placed too high for themselves, and allows them to be who they are, wherever they are at. It allows us to walk

side by side, hand in hand, through the journey they are embarking on, together. We are able to peer through each other's mirrors, continually adjusting our own reflected selves as we learn together.

### **Summary**

Candy taught me a valuable skill, without even knowing it. I'm sure she didn't know that 25 years later I would be reflecting on it, if she even remembers the situation. She allowed me to look through her mirror, so that one day I would do the same for others. She taught me to look in the mirror and challenge what I saw, not just accept it, but that I could mold it and help it evolve into whatever I wanted. She taught me to allow others the same courtesy, and that through this exchange, we are able to grow and learn together.