

This Is What We Mean By “Dance Trauma”

TW: Eating Disorders

For as far back of my childhood I can remember, the hours that I wasn't in school weren't spent at home or a playground, but rather in fluorescent lighted rooms lined with barres and plastered with marley flooring. It was in hot, little dressing rooms filled with so much hairspray and dust and bare feet that any normal person who entered was sure to develop some degree of a minor case of lung poisoning. In the hallways of whatever theater had been rented out at UCI for *The Nutcracker* that year, craning my neck to catch a glimpse at whatever principle dancer that was the Sugarplum Fairy that year. It was in class, no matter what, rain, shine, with a fever, whether it meant missing outdoor science camp in fifth grade or open house in middle school. From the period of my life that I started my travels along the difficult, painful road of body insecurity, I can only remember the analogy my ballet teacher gave me for how I should view my body. I was like a tree, I remember her saying. Although I had a lovely face, I had branches, my limbs and stomach, that weren't like the others in my class. I was a crooked tree, and I should work to make them thinner and straighter if I really wanted to be a ballerina. Even though I couldn't have been more than twelve, weighing no more than 100 pounds, I was asked to lose weight.

At the time, I was too young to understand the full implications of weight loss in adolescents, and too young to know that the ballerina I was being conditioned into was an unrealistic mold. I did understand, however, that my natural body type was unconventional for a ballerina. I had flat feet, no natural flexibility or extension, no back strength, no hyperextension in my legs, and I knew why I was always placed in the back even though I was one of the shortest girls in the class. All of the Russian prima ballerinas we watched on tapes in the studio were all impeccably skinny, their arches perfect, and their legs seemed to contain only muscle, no fat. In black leotards and ballet pink tights, every curve of your body is exposed. I began to look into the mirrors that covered the walls and analyze every inch of my body, especially my stomach, which I was suddenly hyper-aware that stuck out.

At twelve years old, the only way I knew how to lose weight like my teacher had asked was to stop eating. I began to go almost full days without eating, only relenting when it felt like there were knives in my stomach, or when I felt so faint that I couldn't stand. When I ate, much to the dismay of my guilty conscience, it would be what my body was craving, which was usually something high in carbs or sugar, and a lot of it at once. I had heard of other ballerina girls who had bulimia, but I was afraid to make myself throw up, so I would spend many nights after a meal laying on the floor of my bedroom, crying, wishing I hadn't eaten at all.

The summer between sixth and seventh grade I got my period. My body seemed to inflate, suddenly I had grown three cup sizes in just a year or so; my hips seemed to swell like balloons. I would compare my thighs to elephants' legs, and my waist to a gigantic tree trunk. I spent hours pinching pieces of fat on my body and imagining a giant meat cleaver cutting it off. Suddenly, there were other problems with my body, my hair started to become greasy so quickly that it looked wet. My skin began to develop pimples and bumps from anxiety and sweat from dance. I went out of my way to avoid mirrors and cameras because I found images of myself difficult to look at. I was ugly and fat, and I thought the whole world knew it.

In middle school physical education, we were routinely weighed, an endeavor that I hated, especially because it was done in front of all the other girls in my grade. My weight, as a result of puberty and height increase, went up to 113 pounds. To this day, I have never felt the shame and mortification as I had, standing in my oversized PE shorts and school shirt, on that scale having my weight read out loud.

It was around this time I switched dance studios to one that wasn't the rigid, Russian ballet school I was used to, but a jazz-based competition studio. I knew that to join the dance program at my future high school I would need to be well-versed in all styles, a process which would involve me taking dreaded jazz classes.

Leaving the ballet studio that I had grown up in and my tight-knit circle of friends was very hard for me to do. In ballet class at my new studio I felt lost, doing the strict, drilled stretches at the barre while the rest of the class casually did the splits and chatted in the center of the room. I took my first jazz class, which proved to be extremely hard and particularly excruciating. I worked muscles that I had never felt before, conditioning and contorting my body in ways I knew my old teachers would disapprove of in a formal class setting. At first, I was horrified at the bulky muscles that developed on my legs and torso, and yet, I was amazed at the things I suddenly could do with determination. Slowly, I made new friends who were also prospective students of the high school dance program, and I met a ballet teacher that would change my life. She told me what I needed to hear, opening an entirely new world of dance, one that doesn't have the rigorous standards of the theoretical dance company I was trained to reach for, but boundless creativity and expression through movement. With her help, I began to enjoy ballet again.

High school was definitely a new, raw experience for me. I discovered an academic fierceness in myself through taking competitive and advanced courses, something that I didn't know I had in me. I began to speak out in class, look people in the eyes, and enjoy being alive, being a teenager. I gained powerful mentors, both academically and artistically. I was introduced to modern, a type of dance that I had never tried or seen before. Things didn't get automatically

better. I would soon be diagnosed with chronic anxiety, after throwing up from panic attacks nearly every day of freshman year. But I would get medication, and help.

In dance, I felt as though what I wanted to do was attainable. Sometimes the realization still hits me, and I am filled with relief and happiness. In books, they always describe these incidents as if a weight was lifted off the main character's chest. I don't think it could have been described more accurately.

I am five foot and four inches tall, weigh one-hundred and twenty-two pounds. Though I struggle to love it, I appreciate my body, which has always been there for me, even when I abused and hated it. Dance probably won't be my career path. But dance will always be a part of who I am, even when I have days where I can't bear to look in the mirror, feel ashamed to see my gut, or get the need to over analyze every inch of my skin. I've talked to other girls who grew up in dance like I did. We are older, and wiser. We shake our heads together about how teachers used to prohibit us from eating candy on Halloween, or riding bikes and going to the park to avoid injury to our precious bodies. We tearfully recount times when we puked in the bathroom during a show, or broke friendships over competition for favoritism.

Recently, I was talking to a girl in my English class who grew up in a neighboring ballet studio.

"Could you ever look in mirrors?" she asked. "Because for the longest time I couldn't. It was physically painful."

"Yes!" I gasped. "Exactly!"

I am surrounded by girls who know body insecurity so well. We have stared at self-hatred and watched as it stared back. We looked it in the eyes every time we looked in the mirror.

I am incredibly sad to say that not everyone gets out of the toxic symptoms of growing up a ballerina. Looking back on my time spent training, I realize that myself and so many others missed out on the milestones of our formative years, and were expected to hold a strict schedule of training and body maintenance that should not be expected of anyone other than a professional athlete, let alone children. Instead of going to birthday parties and Disneyland and trick-or-treating, we trained and counted the calories we ate. I realize that, in many ways, something important was stolen from me. Not by the fault of any one person, or even any group of people, not by my poor mother, who had no idea, or even my teacher who told me my body wasn't the right shape when I was twelve, but regardless, damage had been done. I had been traumatized. It took me so long to learn that trauma can be accumulated over time, in little amounts and bits; it isn't always one huge event.

I pray that reform moves fast. The road I had to travel to get into a stable condition in terms of how I regarded myself and my body isn't something that I would wish on my greatest enemy. I hope to God that soon, we see more representation in the dance world. That ballerinas are chosen in the professional world based on ability, and not size. It feels like an unrealistic dream, the changes in mindset would have to be immense, but nonetheless, all of the women I've talked to who grew up as ballerinas and I hold it in our hearts. After all, we started dancing in the first place because we loved it.