STRUGGLE FOR FLIGHT: THE PROCESS OF
MAKING AERIAL DANCES

by
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ABSTRACT

Finding my voice as a choreographer in the genre of aerial dance serves as the focus of this thesis. In order to provide context, a brief history of aerial dance illuminates the connections between aerial dance and modern dance aesthetics as well as its inclusion in academic dance programs. I began my research by exploring the myth of human flight, but quickly changed course when the aerial apparatus I selected did not lend itself to this idea. Through the process of creating three different aerial dances, I explore several themes pivotal to aerial choreography including declaring an intention, embodying an intention, and learning to be present even when the process involved struggle. A reflection on my own experiences and deep beliefs sheds light on my choices as a dancer and choreographer. Finally, I discuss the journey of finding my niche as an aerial dance artist.
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Aerial dance, a very young art form, has a variety of influences ranging from modern and postmodern dance to circus arts. In fact, aerial dance and aerial circus arts are often combined into one category, but these two art forms have very distinct histories.

Aerial dance has its roots in the postmodern era of dance in the 1960s. During this time period, artists posed many questions about what is needed to make a dance as well as where a dance could take place. Aerial dance emerged as an outcropping of site-specific dance, following artists like Trisha Brown who placed dancers on a city wall in *Planes* in 1968. During this time period, dancers were also exploring Skinner Releasing Technique and contact improvisation. These forms greatly influenced some of the pioneers of aerial dance, who were studying the current modern dance techniques while also exploring movement in the air (Smith & Bernasconi, 2008).

Aerial dance emerged in two separate groups; one led by Terry Sendgraff on the west coast, and the other led by Stephanie Evanitsky on the east coast. While each artist began working around the same time, they didn’t know of each other.
Consequently, both artists had studied under Alwin Nikolais, a modern dance choreographer whose emphasis on space inspired many current aerial artists. Evanitsky stated, “Nikolais taught you how to acknowledge the space around you. When you walked on the street after class, you could feel the space around you” (Smith & Bernasconi, 2008, p. 14).

While Evanitsky discontinued aerial work after 10 years of running her company, Sendgraff became the central influence of the aerial dance diaspora. Known as the mother of aerial dance, she was the first to experiment with low flying trapezes rigged from a single point, more commonly known today as dance trapezes (Smith & Bernasconi, 2008). In an interview for Contact Quarterly, Sendgraff describes how the work evolved from traditional circus skills to a form of meditation on low-flying trapezes known as Motivity. She points out that her teaching style utilizes sensory awareness methods enabling the individual to discover his or her own aesthetic values (Bernasconi, 2001, pp. 20-21).

Just as aerial dance began developing in the United States in the 1970s, Cirque Nouveau began emerging in France (Bartley, 2008). The movement spread to North America in 1984 with the founding of Cirque du Soleil in Baie-Saint-Paul, Quebec, Canada (website). In Rings of Desire, Helen Stoddart claims that the new circus has eliminated animal acts in exchange for the total theatre experience complete with theme and narrative. This evolution is the result of a cross-pollination of traditional circus skills with other performing arts genres. (Stoddart, 2000). Much like the evolution of modern dance from ballet roots, the Cirque
Nouveau style intended to convey meaning in addition to showcasing a performer’s virtuosity.

Today, the aerial dance community features companies and solo performers from such diverse backgrounds as dance, theatre, music, circus arts, gymnastics, rock climbing and diving. In fact, performers in all genres are taking greater physical risks than ever before. According to Helen Stoddart, aerialists often represent heroism by defying gravity (Stoddart, 2000, p. 166). Terri Schneider’s study of adventure racing reveals that risk is “an integral part of the North American value structure and is generally valued positively, especially if success is the outcome of the risk action taken” (Schneider, 2007, p. 332). Joanna Haigood, artistic director of Zaccho Dance Theatre, states that risky activities like aerial work require letting go of destructive mental images in order to clearly find one’s center (Howard, 2004).

Even though current aerialists come from so many different physical backgrounds, many artists with whom I have studied still trace their lineage back to Terry Sendgraff. Joanna Haigood, founder of Zaccho Dance Theatre in Oakland, California explores architecture and the sense of place in her site-specific work. Amelia Rudolph, founder of Project Bandaloop in Oakland, explores urban and natural settings to honor the human spirit. Others influenced by Sendgraff include Anne Bunker, founder of Orts Theatre of Dance in Phoenix, Arizona; Nancy Smith, founder of Frequent Flyer Productions and the Aerial Dance Festival in Boulder, Colorado; Jayne Bernasconi, founder of Air Dance Bernasconi in Baltimore,
Maryland; and Susan Murphy, founder of Canopy Studio in Athens, Georgia (Smith & Bernasconi, 2008).

International companies not connected to Sendgraff include Brenda Angiel Aerial Dance Company and De la Guarda, both based in Argentina. Angiel states that her use of ropes and harnesses as well as bungee enables an audience member to “transcend his static vision and generate a new point of view” (Smith and Bernasconi, 2008, p. 63). Performance art companies like De la Guarda that are more theatrical in nature use the aerial arts with large sets and movement to create entire sensorial environments (Hernandez, 2007).

In recent years, aerial dance has made its way into academe. This entrée into dance education began when pioneer aerialists like Anne Bunker (University of Hawaii at Hilo and founder of Orts Theatre of Dance in Phoenix) began working as professors at various universities throughout the United States. In Boulder, Colorado, the aerial dance company Frequent Flyers Productions has close ties with the University of Colorado at Boulder through summer workshops, graduate student research in aerial dance, and the Aerial Dance Festival. In some cases, as with the University of Georgia and the University of New Hampshire, circus arts coaches like Elsie and Serenity Smith have been commissioned to coach university dancers in aerial technique. In both of these instances, the university dance company's artistic director takes on the role of choreographer for aerial pieces. The model used by my company, Revolve Aerial Dance, involves having the commissioned aerial artists in charge of both technical training and choreographic decisions.
The first members of Revolve Aerial Dance have backgrounds in both dance and the aerial arts. Our knowledge of aerial work has allowed us to fully investigate vertical space, and our dance training has allowed us to find transitions and meaning. While I have been greatly influenced by the artists mentioned previously, my own beginning as an aerialist was less organized and more experiential than the traditional model of apprenticeship. More information on my background is discussed in the next chapter.
I have always had a passion for the arts, particularly for dance. Movement captivated me even as a young child; I had to be constantly moving and fully involved in the world around me. But something changed as I grew older. I still had a great passion for dance but didn’t feel like I was inside of it anymore. Moving with authenticity used to come so easily to me, but as an adult it became more difficult as I was focused on moving how I was supposed to move. I was no longer my own authority figure, and I had deferred that authority to “expert” adults whom I aimed to please. Like standing on the edge of a lake dying to jump in, I found myself resisting the urge and instead, barely dipping my toes in the water for fear of being wrong.

There are so many reasons why we might separate ourselves from the very thing that brings us the most joy. But how does someone like me transition from the place of disembodiment back to full embodiment? How does the creative process enable me to reclaim my own authenticity as an artist and human being? These questions serve as the focus of this thesis.
I have always been the ultimate pleaser and this holds me back. In college improvisation classes I found it difficult to feel connected with my movement because I was so worried that it wouldn’t be “right.” But this hesitancy started to shift when I was cast in an aerial dance piece at Winthrop University. While I had seen aerial work in shows like Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus and Cirque du Soleil, I had no prior training in the aerial arts. I also had no preconceived notions about what an aerial dance should look or feel like because I had never seen one before. This lack of knowledge was freeing in many ways because there was no “right” answer. I could explore and create without trying to fit a mold.

During these aerial rehearsals I found myself improvising and fully investigating movement without knowing it. The choreographer caught me in mid-play several times and told the cast, “Do what Julianna just did.” While my kinesthetic sensibilities were strong in this type of movement (I had an innate spatial awareness while moving around different axes), my voice was also acknowledged and valued. I felt successful in this genre of dance, and I stood out in a positive way. I had also begun to feel the inklings of my own voice emerging from the deep. The possibilities seemed endless. I got to be an inventor in this new genre.

Upon graduation I worked very actively in the dance field as a teacher for three years. I continued studying aerial dance through workshops and even performed occasionally, but I didn’t have the tools necessary to create and perform with the rigor I wanted for myself. I began to feel a sense of emptiness because I lacked a deeper understanding of myself as an artist. I felt stuck in that I could no
longer bring dance to life for those whom I taught. Dance was barely alive for me due to the many years of formal dance training that emphasized doing the right steps in a “beautiful” way rather than doing what felt real. I experienced the same separation from dance that I felt so many years earlier, hesitating once again on the edge of the water because I had not yet affirmed my own voice as a dancer. Wanting to re-discover dance at a deeper, more visceral level, I sought graduate study in dance to fulfill that need. According to Christopher Vogler (1998), becoming uncomfortable with the way things are is a primary motive for a hero to begin an adventure. The feeling of emptiness was my own internal call to adventure.
CHAPTER 3

THE MYTH OF HUMAN FLIGHT

As a graduate student at the University of Utah in the Department of Modern Dance, I decided that my continued yearning to move expressively in the air deserved some research attention. I became very interested in exploring the myth of human flight through aerial dance. Aerial dance is defined as “anything that lifts a dancer off the ground with an apparatus, such as a trapeze, hoop, rope and harness, stilts, bed frames, suspended bicycles, or lawn chairs. However, it’s not just the liftoff that makes it aerial dance; it’s the intention of the choreographer using aerial and its relationship to modern dance aesthetics” (Smith & Bernasconi, 2008, p. 6). The myth of Icarus, a prideful son who dies in pursuit of flight, is a typical reference point for aerialists exploring this human desire. Flight is a movement experience that goes beyond human capabilities, involves great risk, and metaphorically can represent transcending boundaries, moving beyond physical confines, and tapping into our vast potential.

I am personally drawn to moving in vertical space, the framing of space created by different apparatuses, and the element of daring revealed when hanging precariously from high places. Creating aerial dances feeds my inner desire to take
certain risks. The physical risk encourages me to face my fear of heights and the creative risk helps me face my fear of alienation (which I will discuss in great depth later). Arlene Goldbard (2010) states:

Behind the choice to live one’s life in the arts, as a maker of beauty and meaning or one who supports that process there is always an awakening that must be characterized in spiritual terms, as an encounter with the ineffable, with something that can never be adequately expressed, but which ignites in our hearts the desire to keep trying. (p. 1)

Upon beginning my thesis research, I wanted to fully explore choreography in the air in addition to using the ground. Smith and Bernasconi (2008) state that an aerial dance is very different from having an “aerial moment” in a dance work, meaning that an apparatus is used briefly to create an image but is not the core component of the work. The choreographer's intention to explore aerial dance making as a craft is what makes the work fall into this category. In my thesis projects my goal was to create aerial dances by fully exploring apparatuses for their possibilities, going beyond a brief aerial moment into the craft of making aerial dances.

When I began working on the piece entitled Hold On Let Go, several questions came to mind: What is it that I want to portray in this dance? Who am I making the dance for? What is the context of the performance? This was my first roadblock…I didn’t know how to approach creating an aerial work within a modern dance program for fear that it would be judged as a cheap trick or lesser art. Instead of dropping inward and listening to my own gut, I sought external validation from friends, colleagues and mentors without solidly declaring an intention for the work beyond selecting an apparatus…a 10’ x 11’ cargo net.
I had several reasons for choosing to use a cargo net. First, I wanted to explore the texture of moving up and down in vertical space without requiring complex equipment like a winch line, which raises and lowers dancers mechanically. Second, I chose the net because it is not a traditional circus apparatus. By working with an uncommon apparatus, I hoped to go beyond more traditional ways of structuring aerial movement and find the dance that lies between the tricks.

Without a clear intention for the work, I hesitantly led the dancers through general improvisations to discover what movement possibilities existed on the net. Rigged from the top and hanging loose at the bottom, this apparatus had a great deal of mobility and not much stability. The net became unpredictable at times since each dancer’s movement had a rippling effect. Remembering complex sequences was difficult and sometimes impossible without an extreme facility in spatial awareness and copious amounts of technical practice time. The dancers could not remember the phrases they improvised, and even translating phrases from video became difficult because the net would never be in the same place twice. At one point I was able to translate a phrase from video, and taught this phrase to the entire cast. But what did the phrase mean, and what did it have to do with my question about desiring flight and verticality? I had no clue, but kept pressing onward into the darkness.
CHAPTER 4

STARTING OVER

For the required showing prior to the concert I arranged all the images that struck me from a visual and kinesthetic place: the net being pulled completely to one side, shaking the net from below with limp bodies caught in the net, and the slow reaching of a dancer above with the rest of the cast anchoring the net from below. However, I was uncertain of how these images related to each other or what they meant in the broader context of a dance. The metaphoric content of this dance still remained elusive to me. On the day of the showing, the hallways outside the dance studio felt like a tunnel where gladiators anxiously wait before battling a lion in the arena. The stakes were high as we were all showing months of hard work.

This moment was a startling wake-up call for me. Seven experienced dance artists and faculty members at the University of Utah sat in a panel before me and critiqued my work. They were honest in their feedback about the lack of progression and intention in the piece thus far. In many ways this news was devastating, but also confirming since I felt lost in my own creative process. The faculty acted as a mirror to reflect what was actually on my mind, the fact that I didn't know what to do next in terms of making the dance.
After the feedback session with the faculty, I thought I had made a mistake by choosing to use a cargo net to depict flight. Being the perfectionist that I am, mistakes are sometimes crippling to me. I often don’t know how to deal with the consequences of mistakes. I tend to plan things meticulously in advance to avoid making mistakes because I don’t trust my ability to improvise. Thankfully in the case of my dance, the mistake had already been made and I had stubbornness on my side. I have been bound and determined to create an aerial dance within the context of a modern dance program for quite some time, and I was not going to stop now.

It is ironic that I chose a cargo net to depict images of flight, because this apparatus is really not conducive to those images. The net best represents entrapment, entanglement, and struggle. It was as if my subconscious mind or shadow self knew something I didn’t and made the choice for me. The shadow character in Jungian psychology represents “unexplored potential, such as affection, creativity, or psychic ability, that goes unexpressed” (Vogler, 1998, p. 75). We all have shadow aspects of ourselves that are often hidden, and in this case my shadow wanted to make a big statement. I often present myself to the world as one who knows and moves through life with ease, but this experience revealed a shadow aspect of myself – the part that doesn’t know the answers.

In the past I’ve tried to avoid struggle at all costs by planning in advance, because I believed that running into problems meant that I made a mistake in the planning process. I have always been known as the neat, organized, polite one who will always be there to help out. My community expects this of me, and I have come to expect it from myself. While I enjoy being able to contribute, these characteristics
that serve me in so many ways also limit me from being spontaneous and
experiencing the “messy” parts of life. I have a fear of being irresponsible, or being
one who cannot be trusted to help in a time of need.

When I began my quest for flight, I found that something vital was missing.
Even though I subconsciously sought struggle, I didn’t know how to actively pursue
it in the creative process and see it as an opportunity to grow. My quest for flight as
a form of transcendence turned into flight as a form of avoidance. I had been unable
to state my intention in creating this work thus far because I didn’t understand that
spontaneity was a crucial part of the creative process. My own inner critic held me
back from diving into the work fully due to an erroneous belief that I had to
accomplish an impossible task – create perfection and plan it in advance.
CHAPTER 5

FACING THE NET

Polarity became the central focus for restructuring my piece. How could I understand flight, both physically and emotionally, by embodying its opposite, entrapment? My own struggle to create a dance became the central theme of the dance. I faced external barriers like rigging, working with a difficult apparatus and time constraints as well as internal barriers such as fear of making mistakes and feeling distanced from the process.

This brings me to an important question for myself as a choreographer: How could the dancers in my piece embody the idea of struggle and the desire to reach beyond limitations when I personally felt restricted by my own distance from the dance? I needed reinforcements in my quest for full embodiment.

Following the graduate showing I was so grateful to have a mentor step into my path. Juan-Carlos Claudio, a former graduate student and current visiting artist at the University of Utah, saw my showing and had many ideas to explore with the net. According to Vogler (1998), “Meeting with the Mentor is the stage of the Hero’s Journey in which the hero gains the supplies, knowledge, and confidence needed to overcome fear and commence the adventure” (p. 117). Juan-Carlos pointed me in
the right direction by offering an intention for the work: chasing an obsession. He also recommended a process of collaboration so that the dancers would contribute movement ideas to the piece.

Juan-Carlos guided me through the creation of several phrases embodying the statement, “reach beyond your limits.” He inspired me by fully investing in movement exploration and phrase building to reveal this intention. When viewing the phrases the dancers made, he pointed out aspects of the movement that interested him, such as an explosive leap over the floor or a sudden slashing motion whipping into a turn. He then modeled a way of overlapping and repeating these phrases to create the effect of individuals blinded by obsession. I had never looked at movement in this particular way before, and I felt overwhelmed by the task of diving in and making decisions so quickly in the moment. At this point I was afraid of frustrating the dancers by making quick decisions and then needing to make multiple changes to find the right fit for the dance.

At several points within the first section, the dancers would nearly collide with each other because the movement was so quick and full-bodied. Instead of viewing this as a mistake, Juan-Carlos noted these moments as fuel for the piece. He suggested that I deliberately use those near collisions to heighten the intensity. This experience showed me that creating a piece is really about noticing what happens in the moment and using those incidents to my advantage. This process required me to develop a strong awareness of what was happening in the space and how it related to my intention. By emphasizing the near misses the dancers’ individual
obsession went beyond themselves into the space of others, thereby escalating the consequences of the rat race.

My goal in working with Juan-Carlos was to absorb everything I could about fully embracing the creative process. His complete commitment in that process set a strong example for me and reflected who I want to be as a choreographer and person. He had an appetite for being in the moment, diving into new movement phrases and manipulating those phrases on many bodies. It was easier for me to go to that deep place of exploration after witnessing another dancer go there. Seeing someone else commit to making choices and then fully realize those choices in the physical body confirmed for me that I am not alone in desiring more out of life than the status quo. Like a treasure hunt or quest, something vital to our existence remains undiscovered until the choreographer stumbles upon it through movement investigation. We are capable of doing so much more than what is expected of us.

When discussing the dance with Juan-Carlos, he offered several ideas to further intensify the images that began to take shape in the studio. Dancers darting past one another through shadowy lighting as well as repeating a cyclical pattern of going up and down the net struck me as particularly interesting in these discussions. The lighting ideas made the images more alive for me. In these moments, I learned that picturing general images in the mind is a great way of preparing for the investigations in the studio, and does not involve planning out every detail in advance. Images give me a direction with enough room for spontaneity, and they also serve as a portal so that I may enter the kinesthetic investigation.
The next big challenge was how to merge the two worlds of the ground and the net into one unified piece. To solve this problem, Juan-Carlos suggested that we create two completely different movement vocabularies for the ground and the net. With this idea in mind, the dancers and I focused on embodying the theme of struggle in very different ways depending on whether the phrase happened on the floor, on the net, or using both surfaces. By keeping the theme alive in our minds and bodies no matter the space, we were able to create a unified dance. We also used the unpredictability of the net to our advantage. Since the net easily caught on the dancer’s bodies, we allowed these flukes or “mistakes” to further support the image of entrapment.

By having some starter material as well as some general ideas of where the dance could go structurally, the dancers and I further developed these phrases to accentuate the images of flying, falling and propulsion by manipulating timing and spatial relationships. In several instances, I noticed that the piece jumped from one place to the next by skipping important developmental steps. For example, the repetition of dancers moving onto and off of the net required very subtle changes in each repetition to advance the piece, but sudden changes made the piece seem choppy and disjointed. By allowing the transitions to happen slowly and gradually build as a journey over time, both the dancers as performers and I as a viewer could tap into the piece kinesthetically.

Fully embracing the process of change over time also holds true in my own dancing. In many cases, I skip steps to get to the next destination instead of appreciating the journey from one point in space to the next. I relate this way of
moving to my earlier separation from feeling in order to avoid pain. By working solely from the outside, I am able to avoid feeling the movement from the inside. I have a preference for visually revealing landmarks in space as opposed to kinesthetically feeling a movement journey over time. In order to gain more options as a performer, I have begun to explore slowing down in my transitions to make sure I experience every inch of space between two points. This gradual experience of space is a primary philosophy of Feldenkrais Movement Awareness training. By working with a Feldenkrais practitioner to develop this different approach to moving, I began to reconnect to my visceral being where deeper emotions reside.

With a strong intention and sense of progression finally in my hands, I was then able to pull in the images that were most meaningful to me from the first experimentations on the net. These images included swinging and dropping off the net as well as mass of bodies flinging and flopping helplessly above while a dancer shook the net ferociously from below. In this last image, the dancers shifted from powering their way up the net to being tossed about helplessly by an outside force. In the context of the entire piece, this image stood out to me because it highlighted the contrast between willpower and surrender.

I had a profound experience with the duality of assertion and surrender at a young age. As a young child learning to swim in the ocean, I learned very quickly that there were some things I could control and others that I couldn’t. The vastness of the ocean captivated me because it made me feel so small, and I had to work hard and struggle to survive its strong currents. Pushing, diving and propelling through the large waves, I felt a profound sense of self and power because the water resisted
me. I remember being slammed into the sand and trapped underwater by a very large wave once, and while I was very shaken by this event I still went back the next day for a swim. I had a profound respect for this power greater than myself, but still felt a desire to assert my own power as an individual in relation to this greater phenomenon. This self-assertion in the face of insurmountable odds could be the key to making dances for a lifetime, constantly diving back into the water in spite of setbacks.

As the dance came to fruition, it became vital that I coach the dancers into the frenzied state of high-stakes survival to make the piece take off. This required that I tap into that place of deeper knowing, or gut instinct. Mostly, I demonstrated the tenacity and stubbornness needed to stay on the constantly moving net. In my demonstrations I noticed an inner dialogue happening in my own mind that allowed the movement to take on a new life. I pictured myself ferociously seeking a goal with a million different roadblocks standing in my way. I shared this image with the dancers and asked them to come up with their own personal image that brought the idea of struggle to life for them. I also asked them to exaggerate what they were already experiencing when working on this challenging apparatus. Rather than shying away from mistakes, I wanted to make their mistakes bigger so they communicated that frustration to an audience. If the dancers’ motivation from the inside felt real to them, then the audience would feel it and more importantly, believe it.
CHAPTER 6

HOLD ON LET GO

My hope for the final piece was to integrate polarities like flight and entrapment, ground and air, and visual and kinesthetic responses while revealing one core intention: obsession. Peggy Hackney (1998) states that the most potential for change is not in one extreme or the other, but in the “lively interplay” of two poles (p. 214). Throughout the piece, the dancers mostly operated alone. Like rats in a maze they chased after a goal and rarely make physical contact. In the floor section, they soared past one another nearly colliding, but never acknowledging each other. As if fighting different battles, each was fully absorbed in their own isolated world.

Descending into the space, the net allowed the rat race to continue upward with the added element of suspension. The net became a membrane capturing the dancers in a never-ending cycle of trying to reach higher. Upon reaching the top, they had nowhere else to go but back down again. Even though the net gave them access to vertical space, its rectangular border created strict boundaries.

A mass of bodies accumulated on the net as each dancer got tangled in the ropes. Inverted and hanging from a high place, the dancers lost their grasp as the
net moved like waves in a storm, tossing them about like ragdolls. Their end was not a happy one; they all fell down leaving one lone dancer trapped, limply hanging by his back.

For me, this piece reveals my fear of faithlessness. I sometimes doubt that there is a greater plan of goodness for all humanity. I fear that the world is like the dancers in the piece feverishly chasing something just beyond their reach. I fear that this chase will only result in disappointment and loneliness, like the concluding image of the dancer’s body limply dangling in the net. I fear that I am a part of this chase, and that I will never be able to truly pursue my passion for dance since society doesn’t generally value movement as a way of knowing. I fear that I am not enough as I am.

Due to these fears, I often don’t trust that life’s process will lead me to the people and places in which I need to learn. The most interesting part of this revelation is that I’ve always thought that I was extremely faithful, trusting, and embracing of the process even though my actions, like being tied to structure and avoiding exploration, have revealed otherwise. Having realized this fear is alive and active in my decision-making, I now have the opportunity to forgive myself and move forward with a greater awareness of my patterns and preferences. I also have the chance to make choices. While neatness, politeness and finding the right answer were values I was raised by, as an artist I must also learn to embrace polarity by making a mess, speaking honestly from my heart and deeply exploring many possibilities.
I recently confronted the “mess” in the creative process while choreographing a dance trapeze duet called *Last Waltz* with my colleague and friend, Elizabeth Stich. This piece was performed in the Department of Modern Dance Student Concert in the Spring of 2010. Amidst the many sweeping moments we experienced when gliding on the trapeze, we also experienced great struggle in articulating our intention. At one point, I feared that the piece would never come together, but in that same moment I felt relieved that I was not alone in this struggle. Elizabeth was in the same boat, paddling right along with me. I wasn’t afraid of what she thought of my choreographic abilities because we were creating the piece together, and we were able to find a solution as a team by showing up and doing the work.

In order to go deeper into performing, I worked with dance choreographer and former director of The New Pickle Family Circus, Tandy Beal. Tandy assisted me in creating a new work entitled *Ongoing*, a dance with hoops on the ground that lead to a suspended aerial hoop. Once I created phrase material based on the theme of turning and spiraling, Tandy helped me find an inner dialogue so that I could stay present in the moment as a performer. We focused on how inner sensation can reveal an outer form with greater intention and clarity than working from the outside in. Developing a dialogue within myself also allowed me to quiet my inner critic, allowing me to remain present for longer stretches of time. By starting each movement with the inner sensation, she encouraged me to believe fully in what I was doing and why I was doing it.
CHAPTER 7

PAST EXPERIENCE AND DEEP BELIEFS

What role did criticism play in my distance from dance as an adult, especially when I had my own dance as a child? I was once very vocal and shared my opinions freely without fear of repercussions. I created dances that involved swinging on tree limbs, climbing on a swing set, balancing precariously on the armrests of a rocking chair, and diving onto living room furniture. I even used yarn to turn my bedroom into a three-dimensional spider web so that I could move over, under and through in different ways. What a satisfying feeling to have to stretch myself to the limit to get across the room! Even then I had this desire to explore environments, design spaces and interact with them.

Childhood allows for so much freedom that it’s easy to be fully present in the moment. The outside world hasn’t yet judged us or told us how to live. Unfortunately, our development into adolescence brings about a host of fears and self-judgments. Impressing others becomes a major priority in the hopes of obtaining social acceptance. In my own experience, my artistic sensibilities made me stand out in a negative way because I was labeled “different,” even in elementary school. Growing up in a small town where the arts were not particularly valued, I
learned that artistry was an appropriate hobby but not a solid occupation. In fact, many people in my community viewed artists as overemotional and irrational decision makers, and therefore undesirable to be around.

I soon realized that my talent was viewed a flaw in the eyes of others. I was often punished for expressing my opinions and emotions especially when I contradicted the status quo. According to Anodea Judith (2004), “Being on the receiving end of...excessive criticism or humiliation as children teaches us to live in fear of exposing ourselves” (p. 307). I had two choices at this point in my life: to ignore what others thought and dance anyway, or avoid the pain of being different and do what was deemed acceptable. I chose to continue dancing, but still relied heavily on acceptance from others. This required that I distance myself from my own dance and do the dance of others instead.

When creating dances during my teenage years and into adulthood, I have always avoided being fully inside of the dance even though I wanted so desperately to go there. In many ways I felt like I had nothing to say. By strongly containing my opinions and emotions when I didn’t meet everyone’s approval, I ended up suppressing my own voice. By not revealing who I was artistically, I avoided the pain of being ostracized by my peers and authority figures. This choice also involved separating my heart from full physical embodiment of ideas, which kept me from feeling deeply. If one wants to avoid feeling pain, one must avoid feeling anything at all.

This conflict of trying to please myself as well as others affected the way I approached choreography in that I often didn’t trust my own voice, and I deferred to
the voice of others for validation. My authority and ownership of my work have been weakened by this choice, and it holds me back expressively. In technique classes I often stick with the given dance combination, performing the exact shapes and spatial patterns as given by the teacher. My movement stays within a certain boundary, for coloring outside of the lines might be viewed as a mistake rather than interpretation.

Somatic therapist Anodea Judith quotes Peter Levine: “Trauma occurs only when an individual adapts to threat (a normal response) but is then unable to adapt again or unable to return to pre-threat functioning” (2004, p. 152). Judith adds to Levine’s thought by stating that repeated traumas can cause the body to freeze in an effort to “partially check out” and disconnect from potential pain. I can relate to this statement because this is how my body responds when I begin making a dance. As soon as I dive in, I tend to stop moving and bail out. I don’t want to be this way, but how can I change it? Hackney, a somatics educator, gives several pointers to moving through the change process: acknowledge your current pattern, accept that pattern and how it serves you, clarify your intent for change, give yourself time and opportunities to practice, and respect the process (1998). While my pattern of avoidance has protected me from criticism, it has also held me back from connecting to my true self as an artist and as a person.

Fortunately, the creative process is also a journey of transformation. Each time one makes a dance the choreographer faces his/her own metaphoric death and fights to come out alive on the other side. In creating my dance, I had to face that part of me that sacrificed deep feeling and investment in order to avoid criticism
and potential alienation. Vogler (1998) states that, “A story is only as good as its villain, because a strong enemy forces a hero to rise to the challenge” (p. 72). Swami Prabhavandanda states, “We are tied to what we hate or fear” (Gates, 2002, p. 169). Naturally, my fears became exposed in the process of creating the piece *Hold On Let Go*, and the threat of not completing the task was imminent if I stuck with my usual defensive moves: avoidance and disembodiment.

To fight these fears head-on, a choreographer must shed the old self to reveal a deeper, stronger self that is better equipped to deal with future confrontations with the enemy. Hackney (1998) states, “Movement is one of the best ways to approach change, because the essence of movement is change” (p. 24). This demands letting go of past attitudes and behaviors to make way for deeper knowledge to surface.

Getting hung up on mistakes is a one-way ticket out of a creative project or any endeavor, as it is impossible for human beings to accomplish anything with complete perfection. In fact, mistakes can lead us to greater understanding and stronger outcomes. Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990) writes the following about the power of mistakes: “Often it is these very accidents that give rise to the most ingenious solutions, and sometimes to off-the-cuff creativity of the highest order” (p. 89). He also states that, “The unconscious is the very bread and butter of the artist, so mistakes and slips of all kinds are to be treasured as priceless information from beyond and within” (p. 89). So the purchase of this maddening cargo net was my own slip, because apparently I needed to confront the very vice that this net represents to me, the ensnarement of my own psyche.
CHAPTER 8

AM I AN ARTIST?

My fear of not belonging in society as an artist makes me consider how we as artists contribute to our communities. Through several conversations with my thesis committee, who are all experienced dance artists and teachers, I am discovering that artists not only create work but also serve as advocates of the creative process. While society is greatly served by logical thinking and efficiency, creative processes like visceral experience and wondering could also serve our communities. And who better than artists to lead others on this journey of exploration?

I feel that my own transformative journey in making a dance has begun to reveal my place in the world. Vogler (1998) states that when a person goes through a life-changing journey and returns to the home tribe, “the wisdom which heroes bring back with them may be so powerful that it forces change not only in them, but also those around them” (p. 228). In the absence of mystics and rites of passage in our culture, we now rely on artists to provide the connection to alternate realities. “Writers should bear in mind that they are mentors of a kind to their readers,
shamans who travel to other worlds and bring back stories to heal their people” (p. 125).

Symbols in myths and in the arts allow people to work through situations and become aware of universal truths (Leeming, 2002, p. 3). I personally feel empowered by this perspective, as it suggests a way that art making contributes to the world. The creative process also serves as an inroad to growth and change. Our tools for confronting conflict, solving problems and stretching our own limits are invaluable to society. These tools include clarity of intention, tenacity, persistence, embracing mistakes, improvising in the moment, and believing in what we are doing to the very core of our beings. Through our own journeys to becoming better artists, we also become mentors for those unfamiliar with the power of the creative process. In this way, the journey toward deeper truth continues on past our own lives and into the lives of others.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Now that I am beginning to discover my own fears and limitations, what am I to make of them? Struggle is like sandpaper polishing a stone, for it refines several things in us: self-definition, a sense of direction, clarity of intention, courage, and endurance to complete a journey. In my case, my initial failure did not lead to alienation but rather an outpouring of support in the form of a mentor and the dancers. I discovered that there are people out there interested in my success. I also learned how to declare an intention, not only for this piece, but also for myself an artist with a future body of work.

Juan-Carlos encouraged me to dive into the journey of creating the dance with a sense of purpose driving the quest, but also a sense of openness to discovery. Validating both the known and unknown, he gave me the choreographic tools needed as well as permission to experiment. Throughout the process I experienced great struggle, combated my worst fears, and lived to tell the tale (my own rite of passage). Joseph Campbell states that rites of passage in traditional cultures “teach the individual to die to the past and be reborn to the future” (2008, p. 10). It was time that I experienced the death of separation from self so that I might embody my own truth once again.
If making dances can reveal so much about the self as it is, then is it possible to create dances to become who you want to be? Art making can be about imagining things differently from how they actually are, so why not create the being I want to become through the dance? Or, conversely, could creating dances be a way of experiencing circumstances that we might otherwise never encounter in our everyday lives? Fortunately, choreographers have the gift of playing with time. We have the ability to reflect on our past, re-frame our present circumstances, and imagine our futures all by arranging moving bodies on a stage.

The creative process for me acted like a mirror, reflecting my own habits and patterns back to me. But it also served as a springboard for experiencing another way of working. While acknowledging that these patterns have served me in many ways, I realized that my growing edge involves coming to terms with the polarity of the known and unknown. Referring back to Hackney's discussion of the "lively interplay" between two polarities, it is time to find balance, accepting that both poles will always exist but I don't have to choose only one. I can both prepare to create a piece by visualizing images and recording general ideas, and then utilize visceral exploration and spontaneity in the studio. In this way, I allow the images to speak back to me. The creative process transforms from a dictation to a conversation, and there is freedom to make a mess of things rather than adhering to a pre-determined structure. In this way I am learning to not only embrace the destination, but also to embody the journey.

Members of my committee were quite candid about their own confrontations with the unknown when creating dances. As a result of their honest reflections, I
now realize that I must let go of the belief that an artist knows exactly what should happen on stage, plans everything in advance, and knows how to get that vision out of their dancers with ease and efficiency. After creating my piece, I realize that I have based my definition of the word “artist” on talent and inspiration, not perspiration. Since obsesssion and tenacity were at the core of my piece, I am revising my definition of “artist” as one who is persistent in spite of the odds.

My main challenge in making dances is to trust my ability to improvise in the moment and make choices in the exploratory process, rather than feeling the need to plan everything in advance. As the administrator of Revolve Aerial Dance, I have often found myself “making it up” as I go. I have allowed myself to be a beginner in this role, so why not allow myself to be a beginner each time I make a dance? Whether its honing the opening moment in a dance or communicating with a new client, I must trust myself to improvise when planning doesn’t serve. Besides, you can only plan what you already know, and diving into the unknown gives us the opportunity to grow.

Ultimately the creative process is not only transformative, but also taps into our deepest desires. Campbell states, “I think that what we are seeking is the experience of being alive” (1988, p. 3). I think we experience this “alive” feeling by testing our edges. By peering over the edge of what we know we can do, we confront two choices: avoid the unknown, or dive in and see what is there for us. If we choose the latter, we have the chance to tap into our hidden potential.
REFERENCES


