

What Moves You to Dance?

A simple question from Alonzo King started one dancer on a journey of articulating the purpose of dancing beyond personal passion

by Kaylyn Hopkins

As an artist, what do you create? What drives you to wake up each morning, to put on that faded combination of leotard and tights, and to repeat the same steps over and over again? What compels you to fight through the sleep deprivation, to move your body in fresh ways? How does your heart move you to express yourself in such a vulnerable way?

Trying to answer these questions has forced me to delve deeper, to ask myself why I dance. I have loved to dance from an early age as have many committed dancers. Yet, I never fully examined my heart to discover why I loved it so much. My drive to feel the pure exhilaration of being on stage, the contortion of my body, and the outpouring emotions had to come from somewhere. Ask dancers why they dance, and I am confident their response will be “because that’s how I express myself.” I don’t doubt that we dance to express ourselves. However, we need to dig deeper to ask what it *is* about dance that makes this particular art form a desired artistic expression.

In the summer of 2011, I had the incredible privilege of listening to Alonzo King, the director of LINES Ballet, as he waxed poetic about dance. This true genius in today’s dance community inspired me to search for the reasons I dance. I wanted to discover what it is I can contribute to the community and, ultimately, to the world through my dancing. He offered thought-provoking questions that challenged me to think more deeply than ever before. I’m sure I wasn’t alone. With each sentence that emerged from Mr. King’s lips, the awareness of all the dancers in the room increased as we began to experience a whole new level of thinking. I felt a buzz of energy as all of us became animated while contemplating why we dance. Each dancer visibly shifted in his or her seated as Mr. King looked each of us in the eye and asked the very personal question, “Why do you dance?” The time came when his wise eyes gazed upon me.

My thoughts shifted to watching King’s beautiful dancers in rehearsals, which we had had the chance to do, and I suddenly felt free to speak from my heart without any restriction as I considered how they made me feel. They danced with a generous invitation to everyone watching. They invited us into their world where everything was honest. From one seamless move to the next, there was never a moment of self-consciousness, fear, or doubt. I basked in the confidence and peace they gave me. This made me realize how I wanted to dance, with so much honesty, generosity, boldness, and courage that it invites others to be bold and confident in who they are, and with whatever they do. I wanted to invite viewers into a world where, if only for a moment, fear, self-consciousness, and haughty attitudes do not exist; rather, let them relax in a world that would nourish and restore their hearts.

My self-inquiry did not stop there. I had started to ask myself how I can make a positive impact in this life by using the passions and abilities God has given me for dance, to give generously, and change lives. But what about others? Why do they dance? This is a question with answers that vary from person to person. The beautiful part is that there is no single, correct

answer, so I set out among the UCI dance major community to ask a few of my colleagues why *they* dance. I received some fantastic responses.

For some, dance is a way to manifest calm energy in their lives. Dance major Laura Hanlon answered my question in this way: “Dance brings me happiness and relaxation. It is a stress reliever and it’s a good way to express how I’m feeling, whether that’s happy or sad.” Every human being needs an outlet of some sort to release how they are feeling. Diana Schoenfield’s response echoed the need for expression, but in a different way. She boldly stated, “I dance because I love music, I want to embody music. It also transports me from my life, and provides an opportunity to express internal struggles in a personal way that isn’t public and dramatic, even though it is seen. It provides an opening for people to see who I am without having to speak.”

Many of us dance because we can communicate better with our bodies than with our words. It’s a way to reveal emotions, desires, frustrations, love, and passion, among other things, and not run the risk of being obstructed by the limited vocabulary we possess. Sometimes, I feel as though no words will be able to completely and adequately express what I want to communicate.

In all of the interviews and articles I’ve read about Alonzo King, I’ve noticed that he stresses how important it is that his dancers give generously to the audience in every performance. Brittney Steacy’s answer to why she dances also has to do with giving to others. She stated, “I dance because I feel blessed by God to be a part of making something beautiful, something that inspires and impacts lives.” I think that every person seeks, adores, or appreciates beauty in some way. Beauty attracts. Beauty enralls. Beauty mesmerizes and captivates. It’s something that can be created and enjoyed. Beauty impacts people’s lives and allows them to experience feelings. We are creatures who feel, and feel often. Some dancers, including myself, dance to allow others to access feelings and emotions. We express our generosity through dance when we offer others that temporary relief from everyday life, giving them beauty and something pleasant to experience for a while.

Alonzo King put it this way when he stated, “I like people who are heroic, who have the ability to get lost in movement and not be self-conscious. Humility is a beautiful thing to see in dancing. Sincerity is something very rare to see, but beautiful when you see it in dancing.” Dancing with humility and generosity is a way to inspire and impact lives. In another interview, Mr. King says, “This isn’t about showing off. This isn’t about skill and technique. And those are the tools that often fool people because it’s really not about what you’re doing, but how you’re doing it, and what is *being said*.”

Not all dancers dance for others. We are all unique and bring something valuable to the table, because we were all created to have diverse purposes. Ginny Ngo responded to my question in this way: “When I dance, I forget to breathe. I forget that I’m tired, injured, in pain, or unhappy. And finally, when I stop moving, I find myself out of breath, inhaling oxygen like I’ve never breathed before. Sometimes it builds my confidence, and sometimes it tears it down. All I know is that I dance for me, and only me.”

There is also the response that people dance *simply* because they are good at it. But, this is actually not such a simple statement. Within it lies an honesty that recognizes a practical

aptitude for contributing to society. Brita Crain-Shiokari stated, “I dance because I need to. I feel like this is the only thing I am good at. Without it, I wouldn’t feel special.” This is a common response that is often overlooked. Why is it that people enter professions to become doctors, lawyers, and teachers? Most likely it’s because they have a keen interest in those particular fields and are intelligent and successful at their respective crafts. Many of them know they can make a difference and impact other’s lives by doing what they do best.

I have enjoyed hearing the different opinions of my friends and can see with such clarity that every person dances for his or her own reasons. The commonality linking each response lies within the concept of “purpose.” We all have one. Whether we have discovered what it is yet, and tapped into it, or are still on our way to discovering why we are here, dance has been placed in our lives and in our hearts as a way to facilitate that purpose. The variation that exists within this question of “purpose” testifies to the uniqueness of each individual.

And so I challenge you, as Alonzo King challenged me, to consider your answer to this question. How are *you* going to use your abilities, talents, knowledge, passions, and, ultimately, your body, to leave your mark on this world, which is dancing with you?

Kaylyn Hopkins graduated from UC Irvine in 2013. She then worked as an aerialist in Japan for Tokyo Disney. Since her return to the U.S., she has been dancing and performing in San Diego, where she also works as a Pilates and Barre instructor.
