

STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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The poet Rumi has written:

The Way Wings Should

*What will
our children do in the morning?
Will they wake with their hearts wanting to play
the way wings
should?*

*Will they have dreamed the needed flights and gathered
the strength from the planets that all men and women need to balance
the wonderful charms of the earth*

So that her power and beauty does not make us forget our own?

I know all about the ways of the heart—how it wants to be alive.

*Love so needs to love
that it will endure almost anything, even abuse,
just to flicker for a moment. But the sky's mouth is kind,
its song will never hurt you, for I
sing those words.*

*What will the children do in the morning
if they do not see us
fly?*

Yes, it is true, we do not teach **children at Loyola Marymount University**, we teach **young adults**. But in the way each day is a new day, every human person is a child and every student at Loyola Marymount comes to us to feather his or her wings and to learn how to fly. More than that, students come to develop the courage to fly, to have somewhere to fly, to know when to fly and when to rest, to fly for a purpose, and to fly for Self in order to learn how to fly for others. If they are to be able to gather the strength for this rather arduous, albeit, deliciously joyous task, students need to know and trust deeply that their teachers have undergone a similar journey of the body, mind, and Spirit. Students are better prepared to reveal their own questions and sustain their own frustrations when they understand that their teacher was once a fledging, that he or she has acquired plumage through work and play, and that he or she has tested this plumage to the sound of the applauding sun and in the silence of the dark night skies. A teacher who has practiced the art of dance and dancing, who has authentically engaged struggle, and who has unreservedly celebrated success has prepared him or herself to open “wings” which create a safe space where others may learn.

I believe that the role of teacher as mentor, guide, coach, and role model is particularly imperative for dance students because dance is a discipline where empathy plays a pivotal role. When we dance, direct communication with the body and Spirit is often not mitigated by any other medium – a text, a computer, paints and brushes. And so it follows that to be a master teacher of dance, one must be willing to expose the Truth of one’s being. Every effort to hide separates one from one’s students. The body, the mind, and the Spirit need to be striving towards optimal alignment. Movement and thinking must be clear. To attain this state of being is neither a simple straightforward process nor is it a finite accomplishment. Living and teaching in this way require ongoing attunement and adjustment. Once learned, the “knowledge” is not really stable because every day lived in the body is a new day. Certainly similar refinement is true for the mathematics or the history teacher. But the dance teacher faces a rather unique situation. With aging and experience, the body’s voices must be constantly rediscovered. Again, this is true for every teacher. However, for the teacher of dance, because the body is central, maturing takes on a dimension of a particular nature. Maturing actually requires coming into new relationship with the material one teaches. This is critically important because the body is not only the vehicle for delivering the message about something else, it is often the “stuff” out of which the message is made. Furthermore, for professors of dance, it is only when these two aspects of being alive connect - residency in a lived body and clarity of mind - does the Spirit have a chance to flow freely. And the flow of Spirit is essential because art is about developing the ears to hear the soul’s voice and the skills to bring that message into expression. Therefore, it is only when Spirit flows that one can act as a **master teacher** of the art.

And so, although teaching dance is potentially communal and deeply joyous, it can also be profoundly lonely when one misses the mark. Inauthenticity during the day can awaken one at night. Reaching with fervor

and every tendon which has attached experience to the bones of skills and knowledge only to miss "grabbing" the fingertips of a dancer who is falling, *falling, falling* into sloth, narcissism, or self-destruction, brings one again and again to one's knees. On a daily basis, a dance teacher sees the effects of his or her teaching right there "in front of his or her face." Work is done in public. The process is exposed -- the mistakes, the corrections, the resistance and the flow. Some days the very valves of one's heart applaud! Some days one has to turn away because the pain of not reaching one's goals grips too fiercely. The **master teacher** does not become intoxicated with the applause, nor does he or she turn the humbling experience of missing the mark into paralyzing self-condemnation or the condemnation of others. Being a master teacher of dance requires content mastery, practiced reflection of Self, of pedagogy, and of life and living, and it requires a sense of joy, humor, patience, and the willingness to rest as well as work.

This thinking propels my work. However, philosophy without animate practicality is incomplete. Many experiential applications inform and integrate my teaching goals: (1) ongoing study of and participation in activities which involve dance and dancing, child and adolescent development, physical wellness, creative process, and spirituality; (2) extensive service work: locally, in the state, and in the nation to keep the LMU Dance Program connected to the bigger picture and to return to the world of dance the overflow of the gift and responsibility I have – this position of teacher and administrator at a University with resources many professional dancers do not have; (3) engagement in research and implementation of the best practices of teachers K-university. This ongoing "hands in the earth" of how to teach, what to teach, and who do I teach takes careful preparation of the soil followed by ongoing weeding, fertilizing, and pest management. Often the harvest is plentiful. Sometimes not enough rain falls or too many pests attack. When this happens, the plants may not leaf or the fruits may fall stunted from the tree. Always I learn. Central current features of this practical work include but are not limited to:

- (1) Investigation and implementation of thoughtful and thorough assessment practices.
- (2) Development of fruitful and challenging collaborative learning practices.
- (3) Development of balanced cognitive and affective learning demands for students of dance.
- (4) Exploration and implementation of Teaching Portfolios as learning tools for myself and my faculty.
- (5) Implementation of teaching strategies which cultivate learning with an activated body-mind-spirit. Integration of the work on multiple intelligences of Dr. Howard Gardner from Harvard.
- (6) Implementation of thoughtful, essential and dance-based intercultural curriculum.
- (7) Study and implementation of Yoga and other body work practices that build body-mind-spirit connection for lifelong, healthful dancing.
- (8) Presentation of the finest concert dance given current resources (time, space, funding).
- (9) Development of career articulation experiences for dance majors.

This kind of teaching takes a lot of time and work on the part of the teacher-administrator. I offer individual coaching, on the spot response, and translation of material for students with diverse sensibilities and varying strengths and portals of entry. I find this process extremely interesting. The challenge means I never teach the "same old thing." I always turn new soil, and I often need different soil amendments. This kind of work requires risk, patience, persistence, and humility. My work requires the ability to wait or rest and to let "things" incubate and the willingness to uproot the non-productive. It requires that I discern the difference between incubation or dormancy and a "bareroot rose bush that will never leaf." It requires that I constantly renew my sense of humor about "defeat" and also cultivate to a willingness to truly celebrate harvest. It requires that I listen to the cycle of learning and pay attention my inner life, the inner life others and the unspoken undercurrents in the world as well as to outer events in my own life, the lives of other human beings and the occurrences in the world in which we live.

This kind of teaching and administrating is both time and energy intensive. Sometimes I only find time to reflect at 2:00 in the morning. Sometimes this is the only time when life makes room for poetry. Sometimes in this twenty-first century world, I feel frightened. Destiny enrolled me in the post-modern world, but I, like many others, am hard-wired for modernity. As a result, my "computer cells" – the cells of my neurological body -- are too often overloaded, and so I spit out "error messages", take too long "to bring up a screen", and I "print garbilly goop" on the face of my life. Sometimes my mind pants breathlessly and my spirit teeters between the stress which stretches me to new growth and the stress that leads to what Hans Selye calls destructive "dis-stress"..... Once when I was particularly overwhelmed and sinking into existential despair, I found this poem...

*We are all of us all the time coming together and
falling apart. The point is, we are not rocks. Who
wants to be one anyway, impermeable,
unchanging, our history already played out.*

John Rosenthal

When I read those words (after arguing with myself whether rocks were indeed as lifeless as Mr. Rosenthal suggests), I somehow thought: "Life is not awful. It is actually AWE-FILLED!!" The cascade of superimposed images can be thrilling. Playing chicken on the railroad tracks of time -- "Will this work get done or will the "deadline" run me over?" -- can have a kind of exhilaration to it. Juggling this with that and watching the blending make a new something that one has never anticipated, feeds my need to create. My spiritual practice, my yoga practice, my study of ideas, the challenge and wisdom of my colleagues and the sheer desire of my students move me away from the brink of implosion into the center of creativity.

My life is animated by awaiting, encountering and dancing with the POSSIBLE – the visible and invisible POSSIBLE in myself and in others -- the possibility of surprising myself with boldness, with tenderness, with beauty, with terror. My living, and thus, my teaching connect my beliefs to practicality and practicality with adventure. They connect seriousness with whimsy; organization and purposefulness with openness for meeting the unexpected. I strive to accept defeat and success as learning-events, focusing on the discoveries and realizing after all these years that when I observe the big picture, what I once labeled as defeat I might now see as success and vice-versa.

When all is said and done: "What is teaching for me right here and right now?" Teaching is allowing myself to become the channel through which the Possible flows. To be sure, it means saturating myself with content. It then means reflecting upon that content, organizing that content, and delivering that content to human beings. Teaching, real teaching, happens everywhere in my life – not only in school. Furthermore, I connect the act of teaching and the act of learning. Teaching and learning interact in my brain, my body, my heart, and my soul.

*Sometimes I am **primarily student** – receiving -- absorbing, questioning, following, responding, asking questions, resisting, fleeing, hiding, transforming.*

*Sometimes I am **primarily teacher** -- giving -- absorbing, questioning, following, responding, asking questions, resisting, fleeing, hiding, transforming.*

The same descriptive gerunds ... different focus. I am simultaneously student and teacher.

My passion for this Teaching-Learning path in life has been tested both in the classroom and through the events of my life outside the classroom. It is as if the pressure of more tumultuous chapters in my life required a kind of focus that yielded distilled awareness. I have discovered that three magnets have enough pull to gather me into coherence when internal and external explosion threaten demolition of all I know to be "good" and "true." These magnets are **the pull of Service** (teaching, leading, helping others), **the pull of Beauty** (music, dance, nature, poetry), **the pull of Love** (prayer, meditation, people, ideas). And they are, in actuality, all the same pull – **the pull of Spirit** – sometimes imminent, sometimes animate, sometimes incarnate. What I have learned is that Teaching and Learning compose a good part of my dance with Spirit. It is not always a waltz. It can be a mosh pit! It is not always coordinated. It can be clumsy and leave me with sore emotional, mental, and spiritual muscles. It is ultimately, however, my soul's purpose: **to learn, to behold, to receive, and to offer**. I was once a new teacher captivated by the power of discovery. I am now a seasoned teacher in even greater awe of the mystery of becoming human. To love to teach, to be really free to love to teach, requires that I submit my idealism to fires so fierce that they burn away all the sentimentality, pretense, and untruth in the content of what I teach and who I am. I am not finished with this work.

When I question, "Why work this hard and with this much at risk?" I remember Rumi's words:

*What will the children do in the morning
if they do not see us
fly?*

I am preparing my students to be dancers on the stage of life. I want them to be educated, thinking, sentient, practical, imaginative people. I want them to be humane beings. I want them to want to fly. I want them to need to fly. I teach them so that they might have strong muscles *throughout* and love-ly feathers *upon* their wings. I teach them so that they might become fearless enough to wing themselves into truthful journeying. The word courage comes from the French word "coeur" – heart. I want my students to fly because they have "learned everything *by heart* -- the *heart* which is the unified body-mind-Spirit. Knowing I cannot ask my students to fly if I am not willing to fly myself, I take inspiration from the birds outside my window and continue to stretch my own wings into the sky.