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Dreaming and Discovering: A Study of Integrating Dance Technique and the Soul

Sydney Clemenson

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Danc 461: Senior Thesis Project

Dreaming and Discovering:
A study of integrating dance technique and the soul

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Mentor: Judy Scalin

In partial fulfillment of
The Bachelor of Arts Degree in Dance
Loyola Marymount University
December 13, 2013

Dreaming and Discovering:
A study of integrating dance technique and the soul

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Thesis Description

This video entitled, "Letting Go," takes the viewer into a moment between two strangers. It is inspired by some of my very own experiences on the streets of New York City, and integrates a few important themes that have continued to present themselves to me this semester. These include ideas of surrender, vulnerability, freedom, and unfiltered curiosity. I was able to collaborate with Paul Vickers, a Loyola Marymount University graduate, along with a videographer from Manhattan. My choreography for this project was sparked by hearing my favorite ballet class pianist play Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," and the movement that came through contains a lightness as well as technical elements acquired by my training at the Ailey School. It seemed inevitable that I would use this piece of music after I heard it two more times within only a couple of weeks; once live in Washington Square and then in the background at a local spa. The final idea of the project is that when people realize their loneliness and see it in others, those feelings are replaced with a form of love, even if only for a few seconds.

The Technique Will Set You Free

Sydney Clemenson

Where does a dancer find that perfect balance between execution and a free spirit? This question has always been circling around in my mind, bombarding my thoughts and approaches to this art form I have dedicated my life to. What is the “right” way to move, and where does the idea of “right” come from? Besides the fact that this is one of life’s ultimate questions, there is an overwhelming confusion in relation to dance as well. I believe this theme of being set free is partly what inspired Lester Horton’s success as a choreographer and what gradually paved the way for his very own codified technique. The Horton technique has proven to be very influential in providing dancers with new insight about right and wrong, and has produced artists of integrity and improvisational creativity through its rigorous technical demands.

Horton was interested in devising a plan that organized a dancer’s body in the most anatomically correct way, so one could be sure of their movement but also push the physical boundaries. Surprisingly, the gathering and compiling of his brilliant work was not accomplished until after his death in 1953. (DanceSpirit) My imagined version of him is something like a mad scientist who left the lab only a few minutes before the experiment came through as a working positive. Horton technique is, inarguably, a positive contribution to the world of dance. I have had the privilege of studying under the instruction of Ana Marie Forsythe, who was chair of the Horton department for many years at the Alvin Ailey School in New York City and wrote books in order to keep the teaching alive. “I’ve been teaching this technique for more than 40 years,” Forsythe says, “and I continue to be impressed with the intelligence and sense of humor that

Horton incorporated. It's maintained my interest after all these years. It's so accessible for dancers. And I love how it helps create dancers who are long and strong."

(DanceSpirit)

The fortification studies are a major part of the warm-up, which begins standing. This is unlike most modern techniques. Fortifications have been so influential in the personal growth I have seen and felt throughout these last few months of Ailey training. Each fortification has an emphasis, such as the strengthening of the feet for number one, or hip mobility for number two. These continue all the way to study number seventeen. In addition to this choreographed strengthening warm-up, there are named movements that are only found in the Horton style. These include things such as "lateral T," "side hip pull," "high parallel position," and "stag turns." There is a correct placement for every little detail, and a dancer is either right or wrong in this technique.

When I entered my first Horton class experience, I expected to feel robotic and rigid doing the movement. In the beginning, it was like this, and I felt contained; struggling to even hold myself on balance in these strange new positions. It didn't take long, though, before I had a breakthrough, and I have had fresh discoveries in Horton ever since. This doesn't mean it is my favorite style, by any means, but I do have a great appreciation and strong feelings of gratitude because of how it has transformed my body. "Horton's technique isn't limited to a concept of one or two movements and their contrasts," Forsythe explains. The technique is dynamic and dramatic, develops both strength and flexibility, and works with an energy that is constantly in motion. The primary focus of many beginner-level Horton studies is creating length in the spine and hamstrings. There is also an emphasis throughout all levels on developing musicality

and performance qualities. As students progress, exercises become longer and more complex." (DanceSpirit) These are some of the main signs of progress that I have noticed as I go further with my training.

Lester Horton was influenced by a mixture of people groups, each having played at least a small part in his own life. He took ideas from Native American dances, and cultures such as Afro-Caribbean, Japanese, and Balinese. It is somewhat shocking to see the Horton technique after knowing it had such a diverse foundation, because it is not particularly stylistic. Despite this fact, Lester Horton knew what he was doing. "I am sincerely trying now to create a dance technique based entirely upon corrective exercises, created with a knowledge of human anatomy; a technique which will correct physical faults and prepare a dancer for any type of dancing he may wish to follow; a technique having all the basic movements which govern the actions of the body; combined with a knowledge of the origin of movement and a sense of artistic design." (Wikipedia--Lester Horton, in a letter to Dorathi Bock Pierre, "From Primitive to Modern," American Dancer (October 1937)

After reading a "fun fact" in Dance Teacher Magazine about Lester Horton's Los Angeles studio not having any mirrors, I realized that this was another major part of how my dancing has been affected. He wanted to "instill that movement should be kinesthetic education and not based on one's reflection," and that idea is being translated through my movement more and more. In her article about the importance of technique classes for dancers, Erica Stanton states, "A dance technique class provides a useful forum for dancers to explore their potential, confront their limitations and start to recognise their own learning through trial and error. In proposing that a technique class

is a 'laboratory,' where problem solving and finding out about how things work are emphasised, opportunities arise for students and teachers to work productively with their abilities *and* their limitations, to value movement for its own sake and to question its context and meaning." This phrase sums up why I have felt completely freed by the Horton technique. The repetition used in each class gives me time to really dig into every concept in the fullest way possible, and I understand my body more and more each time I walk out of the studio. The most beneficial aspect of such a structured format in a technique class is that it gives the mind time to zero in on the task at hand. I know what correct feels like, and this knowledge allows me to shift my focus from the outside perception of my dancing to my very real and very present self.

"An improvisation technique should be *generic* in that it can apply to different body configurations and movements. It should also be *specific* in that it offers a cognitive shortcut to describing a particular class or subset of (the space of all possible) movements." Ivar Hagendoorn discusses many improvisational techniques in an article entitled, "*Cognitive Dance Impovisation: How Study of the Motor System Can Inspire Dance (and Vice Versa)*." What I believe is at the core of all his ideas, is the given variable of physical awareness. Horton has given me more tools and cognitive patterns that I never even could have imagined, and this has lead to a wide horizon of movement options. I can call upon new shapes, dynamics qualities, and use my strength to its potential based on the specific requirements of this technique. It requires accuracy in line, musicality, and choice-making in the moment when it comes to dynamic attack or retreat. Once a dancer is exposed to the lengthening aspect of Horton movement, he or she begins to demand the highest self-standard in order to reach confidence in

movement execution. In improvisation, this mindset will serve a performer very well as they commit to every single moment and achieve its maximum completion.

Lester Horton had a genius mind and was able to combine rules and specific settings with ideas of openness and individual expression through the spirit. I think about this and quickly compare it with my entire New York City adventure. I am learning each day that letting go begins with a foundation. A bird cannot take flight unless it has a place to take flight from. I am grounded in my faith just as I am becoming grounded in this technique, and they have both led me to freedom. My life has become a sea of possibility and change, as has my dancing. There will be constant growth, and I have become aware that no adventure will ever really be finished, just like no lateral T will ever be absolutely perfect. It will always require more stretch, more effort, and more care. This is the beauty of improvising through life and always striving for greatness in what I am called to do. I trust that my tools will guide me to more and more inspiration and joyful freedom.

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Reflections: Summaries of Dance Studies
Sydney Clemenson
9/25/13

Fundamentals of Dance Composition I and II: This course aided in my individual development of a unique choreography process. I remember doing some of the studies such as the machine study and the sculpture study, and learning some of the most interesting tips about beginning a movement phrase or idea. The freshmen class came together so well during this year-long class, because of the nature of the way we were asked to work with one another. This aspect of community was probably the greatest experience for me at the time, and I felt myself opening up to my peers and new possibilities each week. I was able to stretch my creative thinking to a place I never thought it would go, and this was just the start of an entire phase of LMU dance and human discovery.

Dance Styles and Forms: Every study we were given in this course challenged me to think outside of the box. I remember realizing how much this “box” of mine was actually holding me back, and decided right then and there that I had had enough of these imaginary limitations. I was given a piece of classical music for one assignment, and I entered into it without fear or hesitation, since that was a large part of the class: overcoming any initial judgments or doubts about completing the tasks at hand. Though the final product was far from anything I ever thought I would have created, it was something I was truly proud of because of its fresh originality. I broke out and even developed an entire character based around the new movement and vocabulary I’d stumbled into. This class also benefitted me as I became more comfortable with performing in front of my fellow dancers and friends.

Laban Movement Analysis: Rudolph Laban developed a way of talking and writing about movement that has stuck with me and helped me narrow down my goals as a dance technician. I discovered that there were entire parts of my kinesphere that I had neglected throughout the years, simply due to a lack of awareness. After finding new territory and learning how to articulate what distinguished the differences between other dancers I observed, I came to the realization that I wanted to cover all of space, take up all possible time, use the most necessary and original shape, and lose myself in the rhythm of every kind of dance. There was no longer a “halfway” or an “almost” achieving something, in dance nor life itself after thinking on the fullness of art. I can now talk about dance in a more intelligent way, and this course also gave me some great tools to use in my future teaching career.

To Dance is Human: Dance, Culture, and Society: This class was unlike anything I had ever experienced at LMU. The bonds our class shared through storytelling stands out to me as the best memory of this time. We opened up to

each other in ways we maybe never could have without a little push, and found friendships that will be long-lasting and stand strong through the years. The content of the course was very thought-provoking; in particular, the Rise video we watched. I was able to made connections between the way cultures interact with each other and how that affected their contributions to dance as an art. People all over the world use dance as an outlet to speak what is really on their hearts. It was so intriguing to me to learn where movements I had done really originated. Sometimes I was shocked, and certain bits of information made me rethink my views on people groups. The issues brought up in this class stirred some very heavy emotions and left us feeling unsettled at times, but I know those struggles are always worth it when they lead to growth as a whole person.

Dance History: From the early days of the original ballerinas, to the contemporary ballets and transitions to styles like modern, jazz, hip hop, each stage covered in this course kept my full attention and always had me asking more questions. My curiosity was something I discovered through taking this class, though a lot of knowledge was gained as well. It was almost more important to me to recognize the style of my own personal learning, and when I found that I was eager and interested to discover more, a new confidence grew within me so I was able to grasp concepts in a new way. To me, the most exciting part of dance history is the jazz age. I am so inspired my people like Jack Cole, Matt Mattox, and Bob Fosse for their courage to step out of the norm and challenge the systems of conventionality. It always brought up a question of why this particular genre of dance inspired me, though, because the basis on which it was built was far from conservative. My goal, as a Christian, is to stick to the foundation and traditional ways of living, but something inside me says that dance was always meant to break boundaries. This is an ongoing dialogue that takes place in my mind. What will I do with the jazz aesthetic and how can I continue serving God using such a progressive art form? What do I want to say through my individual expression? Dance history was the spark for a personal journey that I am sure will continue for a very long time.

Kinesiology I and II: Words cannot describe how much I learned in this course. We studied nutrition, health and injury prevention, muscles, bones, and how to maintain correct alignment. The biomechanics of the body never failed to overwhelm me, but the ideas we considered deeply did end up showing through in my technique. I was able to talk about specifics of how a movement occurred, what to initiate, and it became easier to point out these things on the dancing body. I am so thankful to have taken this class when I did, because the knowledge and understanding that I gained has literally saved my life here at the Ailey School. We are attacking dance like we are invincible, and though that is the way to produce technical machines, I know better at times. That sounds strange when I'm referring to teachers who have taught professionals their entire lives, but I am very confident in the fact that I can accomplish an intense

strengthening exercise in Dunham class without throwing my back out or obtaining whiplash. Sometimes it just takes an extra little thought or helpful tip going through my head, or hearing Mavis' voice in addition to the information my instructor at Ailey is giving. I see my Kinesiology experience as a tool that has set me free, not held me back, and something that will guide me into a longterm and healthy career.

Careers in Dance: This course was an eye-opener, in many ways, but mostly for the sake of giving me a heads up about the real dancer's life. It is not always glamorous. In the processes of building resumes, biographies, reels, and learning how to professionally respond to an email, there were many moments where I realized that this was actually going to happen. I learned that my body and the way I conduct my actions would make or break my business. We talked, as a class, about our opinions on each other's work, and that was a humbling and amazing experience every week. The way I go about making connections out here in New York is a certain way because of this class. I can be trusted to follow through with what I say I will do, know how to reach out for help in a professional and honest way, and have a new sense of who I am as a communicator.

Ballet: My ballet experiences at LMU have been vast and different in their approaches and how they affected me as an artist. From Lillian's progressive, Alexander technique to John's more classical "just do it" ideas, I grew immensely in every type of class I took. We learned life lessons along with the technique in Tekla's class, learned what it meant to be a working dancer and a teacher from Andy Schermoly, and studied history and vocabulary with Lisa Gillespie. I am so grateful to have worked with a wide variety of instructors, because the differences between them made me more versatile and able to accept any sort of criticism or guidance. Now, as I study at a conservatory-style school and fight to stay afloat in the world of rigid technique that seems to leave no room for individual expression at times, I am always able to go back to some of the foundational concepts I delved into at LMU. They allow me to release tension in my body, see the space around me, and stay aware of sensations in my body as I move, which are all ideas that keep ballet fresh and exciting.

Modern: My experiences with modern at LMU were similar to ballet, because each teacher I had the opportunity to learn from brought a totally new story, style, and approach with them. There are so many different ideas involved in modern, and that is what each class proved to me. I went through both mental and physical struggle, but the end result was me finding a completely new way of moving and enjoying dance. With many teachers, we studied a version of Release Technique, and this impacted every style of dance for me. I even realized that all this modern training was changing the way I performed hip hop or jazz combinations, and that without it, I probably would have stayed in a safe

place of controlled and rule-based dancing. One of the main concepts that I saw shift my artistic voice in many genres of dance, was the idea of momentum as opposed to movement guided by muscle. I also took part in the most amazing Countertechnique workshop during the winter of my junior year, and just a few days certainly gave me freedom in movement I had never felt before. Modern served as a great basis for the knowledge I am gaining through Ailey, as well, and it has been quite the journey to transition from more contemporary to classical styles such as Graham, Horton, and Dunham.

Jazz: Jazz is really where I find my passion gravitating to as an artist. From the mixture of technique and individual storytelling to the limitless amount of aesthetics I see within the genre, jazz continues to ignite something deep within me. I absolutely love and can't live without the expression jazz allows a dancer to have, and this is something that was cultivated at LMU with Paige Porter, Jason Myhre, and the many guest artists they brought in. I learned that attacking movement is something I would always shy away from, but when faced with the challenge of getting out of my comfort zone, I experienced a freedom like never before. Jazz history, as I mentioned before, always inspires me, and we spent a lot of time learning about individual artists from many different dance eras. These names come up so much more than I thought they would, and it brings a feeling of accomplishment when I can jump in and be a part of a conversation about jazz aficionadas and legends. Jazz classes at LMU were also geared toward knowing, and I mean physically knowing, technical ballet and jazz terms. This is something I am very thankful for. I continue to use this knowledge in my every day life at the Ailey school and in my writing.

World Dance: I took West African, which was a course I will never forget. Each week was focused on a different style or tribe's take on a certain celebration in their culture. Never again will I walk in to any type of dance class without thinking about where the style came from and what the meaning is behind it. Our performance at the end of the semester was such a fun way to wrap up our fun and very worthwhile time with Monte Ellison, and we came together as a class yet again. Having the opportunity of coming in to a college class to simply enjoy the company of those around you and let loose is more than anyone could ask for, and I realized that that sense of community is what gave birth to the Africanist aesthetic.

Tap: This class was a great way to keep tap fresh in my vocabulary, and I wish I could have taken it more than just for one semester. Each week we added on to a combination and perfected it as a class. Heroshi would show us films of famous tappers in many different stages of American history, and we learned both hoofing and softshoe portions of dances he had performed in his career. I intend on keeping tap in my bag of tricks, so this course served as a reminder of how much I love musicality and the discipline it takes to strive for perfection.

Yoga: I took yoga as a way to release tension in my body, and it ended up fulfilling a different need. Though I was in conflict with quite a few of the ideas revolving around the practice of yoga, I learned a lot about my perspective of the world and how I naturally respond to stress. It was nice to come to class each Friday morning and make time for both physical and mental reflection. My body and mind were able to rest and be rejuvenated through the use of silence and movement guided by the breath of life.

Artistic Statement

Sydney Clemenson: A New Perspective

I am inspired by so much in this world, that often times the problem is in attempting to narrow my focus. It is impossible to choose one specific company or performer that guides me through my artistic journey, and I'm not even quite sure if I know what I want the end product of myself to look like. There really is no end, and that is what fascinates me about dance. As a performer, I am constantly making new decisions about what message is most important to portray. When I see artists who are versatile, vulnerable, and open, that is when I am moved.

Aszure Barton's new piece entitled "Lift" was recently set on the Ailey Company. Seeing modern that was both subtle and explosive, athletic and artistic, sets a standard in my mind. I know that I am unsatisfied watching dance that is lacking in dynamic movement and a story. "Lift" took the audience on a journey and left the people wanting more of both the amazing talent and the soul. I was captured by the moments that were like bursts of fire, sparking and sizzling to lead in to the next wave of vocabulary. Another choreographer I admire and have been watching for quite some time is Justin Giles. His particular style grabbed me from the very first time I took his class and realized he is a musical genius. His musicality challenges me to include that element in my dancing at all times, and anything without it just doesn't hold my attention. I absolutely love when his choreography freezes. This is a detail of his work that I have focused on executing in my movement, and finding that stillness has definitely influenced my ability to express myself.

Christopher Gatelli and Richard Hinds are two very influential Broadway choreographers I have had the chance to learn more about since being in New York City. They are set apart, in my mind, as some of our present "greats" in the business. They haven't lost that sense of class or the ability to be lyrical. Jazz has strayed so far away from its traditional roots, and that is a long story that can be addressed on a later date, but I appreciate these artists so much for their

courage to keep pure jazz alive. When I see artists and performers dedicating their careers to putting effort into many different styles, that is when I am truly impressed.

Music has been and always will be a passion of mine. I am learning more and more about my own singing voice and how to express a wider spectrum of emotions through it. I hear rhythm like it is a part of my body; it has always been like a second heartbeat, and is inescapable. I grew up being told to quit tapping my fingers on the table or stop dancing in the aisles of the grocery store, and this has not changed one bit. My love of music affects my dancing completely, and I truly feel we can't have one without the other.

Poetry and songwriting have been major interests of mine for as long as I can remember. The way I think about phrasing and pattern translates to my movement, and because of this aspect, I notice a tendency in my dancing toward symmetry and wholeness. There is also a strong work ethic that has crossed over, though I am not sure from which activity it originated. I am aware of this gift, (that is sometimes a curse), where it is not an option for me to walk away from anything incomplete. This is very necessary in order to "get the job done," but also keeps me in this perfectionist zone, which I have seen work against an artist.

One other interest that influences my dance aesthetic is athletics. I played basketball, tennis, and volleyball throughout my school years, with volleyball being almost as important to me as my dance training for some time. I learned to be quick, strong, goal-oriented, and many other things that still describe me today. My natural style has a sense of control that I feel is even more prominent because of my past experience with strength-training and conditioning in multiple sports.

It is intriguing to look back at times in my life and realize that I have a totally different mindset when it comes to certain things in dance. The foundation of why I dance is still there, and the history has everything to do with where I am now, but this art does not mean to me now what it did then. It means so much more. My training began in small-town, rural Iowa, and I didn't realize until just recently that all my years of "training" were actually non-existent. I danced

my heart out from age 3 to my high school graduation, but was really missing some key technical elements, such as consistent ballet classes, for a majority of that time. I made the trek out to California, discovering the beauty and necessity of more intense technical focus at Loyola Marymount University, but more importantly, discovered my actual humanity in dance. I was introduced to contemporary modern styles and ways of moving that I had never experienced, acquired knowledge of where dance came from that gave what I was doing even more value, and really just fell in love with improvisation. I studied all kinds of jazz and found many of those paths to be the most beneficial for me to channel creativity. I began to shift towards a more commercial dance mode, since it was the direction I felt most able to express and let go, and letting go became a huge theme of mine throughout those years at LMU.

For my last year of college, I made the last-minute and very drastic switch to New York City, choosing the Ailey School for a new and fresh dance education. This is where I am training now, and what has opened my mind to possibilities I never would have imagined. Who would have thought, that after coming from a background void of real technique, I would begin to see potential for a future in genres that require the highest of technical levels. Before, I knew for a fact that ballet was not a road I would ever travel, and I had accepted the fact that it was just not my calling in dance. "I'm not trying to be a ballerina." That is still a true statement, in one way, since ballet is not my true passion. In another light, though, why wouldn't I try? That is just one way Ailey has changed my thinking. It has given me the hope of having no limits. I have never seen this kind of progress and growth happen so fast, so it seems pointless to put a cap on that when I have just begun.

Studying classical modern techniques such as Horton, Dunham, and Graham has been the greatest experience and has given me tools for all styles of dance. I am more aware of how I use my center and understand that is where all movement comes from. I have found lines I didn't know could exist in my body through the strengthening of smaller muscle groups. These techniques, along with all the ballet, have a very special place in my heart and a place in my

future. When I teach, I will be devoted to sharing as much of this information as I can in order to provide my students with endless options of movement patterns. It is endless.

All of this revelation and exploration of higher standards makes it difficult to value what I've done in the past at times. That is probably every dancer or choreographer's mindset, and sadly, I don't see this changing. I can appreciate the journey, though, and at least value all those things in their own time. Without the performances or choreography projects accomplished prior to this stage in my career, none of what I'm experiencing now would even exist. I was able to sift through my thoughts and natural ways of moving for many years and in many different forms before reaching this time, and just as I have this funny view of how things used to be, it is certain that I will be saying the same things ten years from now.

When I imagine the greatest dancer in my mind, I see beauty shining through in every moment she is breathing. This beauty exists both on and off the stage, inside and outside of the studio. My beliefs allow me to see this energy and spirit as the most ultimate form of holiness we could ever possess; the Holy Spirit. I know that God gave the world communication through movement for a reason, and it is to serve Him fully, without any reservations. This describes how the dancer commits to every breath, no matter if she is being watched or not. She brings life and wonder to the transitions in choreography, just like she marvels at the in-between stages of life. They always lead somewhere, and the only way to arrive in these newfound states of being is to live by the truth. She knows this, and this honesty is embodied in the way she cares for every step she takes. Each one could be her last. This dancer is technically sound, and fights the fight to maintain her strength everyday. She is radiant, bold, unpredictable, and never forgets why she is dancing.

This is who I long to be. Through all stages of my life so far, one thing has remained the same. I desire to live for God and worship Him through my dancing. My aesthetic is a product of where He has guided me and how He has allowed me to grow. That is an amazing realization that will forever dictate how I work, what classes I take, which auditions I choose, what jobs I

accept, and everything other decision there is to make in this business. I am responsible for shaping my career, but thankfully, I am not alone in that overwhelming endeavor. God will never lead me astray. When the time comes and I am ready to fully dive in to the dance world, (auditioning and working, auditioning and working,) I will have the same sense of calm. I am also feeling more ready every day for that time since options of what styles I prefer continue to be illuminated. There is nothing stopping me from going for that Broadway dream, and at the same time, I would love traveling and touring with a contemporary company in Europe. In a way, a spectrum this wide may look scary, but I am seeing it as this sea with opportunity after opportunity and adventure after adventure. My mind is blown with the inevitable and exciting fact that both my dancing and my life will continue shifting in such unexpected ways.

Letting Go
Thoughts from a "New" New Yorker
Sydney Clemenson

-Never before had I felt such freedom. Never before had I experienced movement in that way. It was day two of Swantje's Countertechnique workshop at Loyola Marymount University and I fell in love with my own dancing for the very first time. Did I look the way I felt? That question does not come with an answer, just like a hamburger doesn't come with brown rice. All that mattered to me was the moment I realized this art form was a true gift from God Himself. Gone were the days full of self-loathing and doubt; physical and mental pain as I sadly attempted to fight the impossible battle of peanut butter dancing. Yes. Peanut butter. We often move as if we're stuck in a giant, human-sized jar of Skippy- the 25% less fat kind! (It's thicker). Countertechnique suddenly allowed me to escape the jar and dive in to an Olympic relay pool that I had all to myself! All this occurred when scientific ideas took over my mind. I learned to end the struggle between my thoughts and my muscles, and voila, I was perfect! Not quite. This was only the first glimpse of a theme that would be growing, developing, and playing out again and again in my dancing. Little did I know, I would label this theme, "Letting Go," and little did I know, it would one day save my life. Arriving in New York City all alone is one of the most overwhelming experiences anyone could ever have. What are the hundreds of buildings I see just in one glance taken quickly from the plane? Each tower has a purpose, is filled with every kind of person, and they each possess every kind of goal, story, and fear imaginable. All of this exists within pockets, creases, and crevices of this city, like your lucky sweater that has been worn on an endless amount of memorable occasions. This city has seen all, felt all, endured through rips and stains, snags and accidental power cycles. Now, as I look down and scan the view of my new home, I realize I have a small, yet very significant part to play in all of this.

-Sydney is a Caucasian American. What does this even mean? Growing up in rural Iowa never once challenged me with such a question. Suddenly, I am thrown into a world where traits like blonde hair and blue eyes draw unwanted attention at times, and dealing with it makes me reevaluate my perspective on this "interculturalism" we learn so much about. In my experience, one accidental footstep taken onto the A train towards Downtown/the Bronx led to desperate power walking and frantic escape plans. Moments such as these brought on confusion and guilt about feeling uneasy in areas where I looked different than those surrounding me. "She's tan," one man murmured to his friend as we crossed paths. "Sexy vanilla..." another man called out. Though the comments themselves weren't offensive or threatening in the least, they still put me in a sort of fish bowl situation. Being in a fish bowl is not necessarily the easiest place to have a nice, leisurely swim. Add to my troubled mind a recollection of a comment made by the Indian driver who transported me to my apartment that very first day. He said he "never comes past 170th st" and pointed out that the neighborhood I'd be residing in

was “very bad, very bad.” “Look at what color they are.” “Look at them.” It wasn’t until later that I realized his warning to me was probably based on a prejudice and preconceived ideas of the types of people I’d be surrounded by. No matter what people want to spin about the giant melting pot and cultures living without division, there will always be a truth of the matter. I saw, firsthand, that what I was almost convinced of was completely false. There are still separations among people groups, and these groups still have their own unique ways of interacting and behaving. These separations also contribute to corrupted assumptions and impressions about unfamiliar ways of life. From here on out, I would take everything I heard with a grain of salt, knowing that individual perspective plays a large role in our society.

This is where dance enters in to the mix. Somehow and somewhere along the line, movement translated. Even as language, clothing, food, and religion remained common barriers, dance prevailed as a unifying force for all.

-This city really doesn’t sleep. I observed a major shift in my overall “aura,” and needed to discover what was going on. Let me just say, Phoebe Buffet would be all over trying to “cleanse” my aura. (That was the first and last Friends reference.) Lack of sleep, focus, and an increase in frustration at the small things in life are all symptoms of what I will call, “Busybody Breakdown.” It is the scientific term. Maybe it’s the fact that no matter how early I get up and going, millions of other ambitious New Yorkers are already downing their third cups of coffee. Possibly, this disorder is brought on by never having a solitary image to fix the eyes on. Everything moves here. It is constantly moving. It is even deceiving to look to the inanimate skyscrapers for solice, because I subconsciously know they are like beehives. They swarm and crawl with busy bees on the inside. Yet another factor to add to the list, that is always waiting for the chance to attack an innocent Mid-Westerner, is that no one seems the least bit concerned with anything outside of their shut down, headphone-plugged bubbles of concentration. This is especially true on the subway. How does it even happen that people are, at times, literally inches away from each other’s faces and never make the slightest bit of eye contact? They do life right next to one another; so close, but not close enough to include or share their precious time. They’ve got things to do and schedules to maintain, and I let this way of life get to me. What a shame. I felt anxious, unsettled, and there had to be something terribly wrong if I wasn’t doing something or at least on my way there. “Busybody breakdown” was not a shining moment for me. Rather, it was a series of failed attempts to stay aware of my own needs and the needs of those around me. These neglected needs included rest, a smile, breathing, eating, (yes, I even forgot that), and being still.

We shall now visit the opposite side of the spectrum. Along with the “Busybody Breakdown,” I also had the dear privilege of visiting the “Depths of Despair.” This was the last place I ever wanted to end up, but nevertheless, found myself down there, contemplating if it could get any deeper.

“We are ‘created for connection,’” Pastor Paul states in his thick Australian accent. I was visiting the Liberty Church in Union Square for the very first time, and enjoying it so far, especially after having walked in to a rock band atmosphere full of people between my age and thirty. I was so refreshed and inspired after that

service, feeling untouchable by negativity and knowing that God was right there with me in the city. Why, then, did I wake up the next morning and struggle with the most intense loneliness for the majority of the day? I kept myself busy, taking a yoga class and doing laundry at Happy's Laundromat for the first time. Yes, I was so very aware of that irony. I went to the New York Public Library with the plan to write amazing things and catch up on some reading, hoping to gradually forget about the pit in my stomach and the ache in my heart. Labor Day. I will just blame that rainy, gloomy, Labor Day for my life issues. Of course, I show up to the beautiful and majestic front staircase of the library, and it is closed. Now, just understand, I was still trying to look on the bright side and plopped down to do some casual people watching with some other friendly-looking tourists. I ate a banana, sipped on an iced coffee, and walked my tired little feet all around Bryant Park in the rain, still assuming my thoughts would drift back to the positive place they had been at church the night before. Hours went by, I was over killing time, and made the subway journey back to the apartment. Later that night, I broke down. I was in New York City, the "world's crossroad," the "city of many hills," the "Big Apple," (more like the biggest, juiciest, oversized Fuji apple anyone has ever seen), all alone. Alone. I thought back to the conversations I'd had that day, counted them on one hand, realized half of those were not even face to face, and suddenly related my sad story to Tom Hanks' in *Castaway*. I didn't even have a volleyball! Wash, rinse, and repeat these emotions of being overwhelmed by the grace and glory of God, then falling back into a state of mild depression. Add a pinch of bitterness, a dash of fear, and there you have it folks; my beginnings as an Ailey dance student.

The joy of the Lord is my strength. It is what got me through the first stage of this new adventure. I couldn't believe that such short amounts of time could seem like many eternities. There were moments when I looked around and felt God opening my eyes and heart to the beauty in this city. Little children playing and clinging to their parents on the subway reminded me of my own loving family, and the promise of the Father's heavenly love. Elderly men and women breathing in the summer sunlight in the midst of some of the most chaotic crowds in Times Square made me thankful for the knowledge I possess of a slower and simpler life. Other moments were filled with frustration and anxiety. I wondered if I was making the right choice, or if I should have stayed with my sister and best friends, studying genres of dance I was actually familiar with. I contemplated if this was something I could handle for one whole year, if the life of a dancer was really what I wanted, and stressed about the distance separating me from everyone I loved. I felt so alone at times.

James 2 says, "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is being tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing." Countless times, I would open up my bible to read such a passage in the climax of my struggles. I would show up to church and hear exactly what I needed to hear that day. After a long, sleepless night of arguing and debating with myself whether or not dance was really my chosen path, the pastor talked about God as our GPS system. Sometimes He leads you through what seem like unnecessary detours and

rough areas, but it is all for His glory and is where you ought to be. So often do we just want to throw the GPS out the car window in order to avoid trouble, but trusting it is the only way to reach our destination. After talking to my mom on the phone about the worry of finding close friends in such a busy city, I was given the information about church community groups, joined one that brought people together for a run and nice breakfast once a week, and immediately felt a wave of hope.

-It's five am. My alarm goes off and I am suddenly brought out of the deepest sleep and released from a panic-based dream into reality. Surprisingly, the panic fell away immediately, almost like I simply removed a heavy sweater. That dream, whatever it was, was long gone and I could focus on the adventure ahead of me. I was not taking my normal subway route today. Instead, I would be bypassing 59th street and charging on to bigger and potentially more exciting opportunities than my normal class routine at Ailey. I decided to shoot for the stars, or at least for Pearl Studios, where Andy Blankenbuehler was holding "Bring It On" auditions. This was a non-equity, open call, and was something that wouldn't leave my mind after I glanced at the posting on my DancePlug account. DancePlug was my main connection to the professional world, since I didn't have an agent whispering sweet sounds of job openings in my ear. Being a student is rough. There is a constant feeling of anxiety when a dancer thinks about what auditions they may be missing every time they step into first position at the barre. Education is precious, and I have definitely come to that understanding, but I do believe that another part of the entire learning experience is testing ability. How will I ever know what I am ready for or what I need to dive into further if I don't try out my skills in different ways? I have to get my feet wet, and that is a key aspect of the journey to becoming a professional artist.

I am already praying as I step onto the A train. I pray that God will be with me today, giving me strength, courage, and wisdom to do His will. I pray and tell Him that no matter what happens with the day, I will recognize that it's all for His glory. My own earthly expectations will not be a part of this experience. It is 7:40 am when I walk in to 519 8th avenue, (the building across from Ripley Grier, which is another main studio-filled building.) This entire area is buzzing at all hours of the morning, day, and night; like a machine that is set on automatic. The machine runs and is fueled by the power of perfectionist, Type-A, close-to-mad actors and dancers who each possess that flame for achieving success. When every flame is accounted for and the sparks are lit all at once, energy is produced. This is true for all of Manhattan, really, but something about the hustle and bustle of the theater district always reminds me of what our country was built on: hard work and determination to maintain the freedoms we have. Artists put their time in, no matter what the available reward. They live and breathe what they do, and can't imagine life any other way. There are no such things as settling or complacency. Needless to say, I enter the holding room on the 12th floor with this refreshing inspiration and continue in prayer as I take a seat on a chair against the wall. Little did I know, this chair would soon be saving me from hours of waiting in this small, stuffy studio, surrounded by anxious girls and air turned to hairspray.

I still wait patiently for a phone call or email about the results of that audition. I made the cut and was asked to sing, and that was an accomplishment in itself. They asked for 16 bars of a pop song, so I whipped out my newly-made sheet music binder like a pro and sang, "Ain't No Mountain High Enough." Things went well, I planted my feet, (remembering what the vocal teacher at Broadway Dance Center told me in class a couple of days prior), and left feeling like I had just conquered the world. God provided me with just what I needed that day.

-I have discovered, being the observant young woman that I am, if I leave my apartment at 7:25 am and not a minute later, I see a handful of the same people on my journey to Ailey. At first, this observation wasn't all that special or intriguing, but then I pondered it some more. I, Sydney Clemenson, am able to insert myself purposefully into people's lives. If I didn't choose to have the exact morning routine that I do, our paths would maybe never cross! There is the middle-aged father walking his two kids, a boy and girl, to school with their dog right there on a leash alongside them. The man smiles each morning, and the dog looks up, but the young children have yet to acknowledge me. After my subway ride on the Q uptown, I pass a handsome, corporate-dressed man who always has his earphones in and a smirk on his beautiful face. I'm pretty sure I've only seen him in blue shirts, which is a point of curiosity. Next, I am greeted by a friendly black truck driver who stands outside of his vehicle to smoke. He says, "Morning, miss," and I greet him back, knowing who I'm about to encounter next. It never fails to be the older woman walking stone-faced, focus straight ahead, to her day job at Balducci's. (She always has the company cap on, and looks as though she can't escape out from under it and all the stress her life brings.) These moments in passing bring philosophical life lessons into my days, and if I am ever asked what my favorite part about New York City is, I tell them about this phenomenon. We are each on this planet for a specific purpose, and the value of a physical being is nothing compared to the soul inside of them. That is what I always long to find. Is it possible to connect with someone on this level in just a split second on the streets of one of the busiest cities in the world? I will find out.