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Dance and Music as Therapy: Post Surgery Recovery and Healing through the Arts

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Introduction

This paper is a narrative account spanning 10-years in the life of Paul, a 19-year-old, elite dancer who, without knowledge of dance therapy, self-determined to *claim dance 'as' therapy for himself* alongside of his medical care, as he faced a long, post-recovery after traumatic brain surgery that left him a mere shadow of his former self. His experiences were recounted in three open-ended interviews supplemented with insights from his brother and the (first author) based on their personal relationships with Paul. Findings demonstrate the connections he unknowingly made to dance therapy to re-train his mind and body and to re-gain strength and function while maintaining a spiritual resolve to remain positive and never give up. His experiences are reflected within the literature related to dance therapy and demonstrate outcomes of healing through dance and music. The intent of this narrative is to inform and share the journey between illness, diagnosis, and recovery. The goal is to honor the value in narrative medicine and how lived stories build relationships between health care professionals and those who walk in the shoes of recovery.

A narrative is a shared account of personal events and experiences and may be conveyed through various means from the spoken word to moving images (Wikipedia, 2022). Sharing one's narrative is purposeful, meaningful, revealing, and can be therapeutic (Charon, 2001). The narrator relives their experiences, and we, who are privileged to learn their storied journey can learn from these accounts. The Columbia University Medical Center stated, "Narrative medicine is medicine practiced with the narrative competence to recognize, absorb, interpret, and honor the stories of illness. This competence lets doctors imagine and enter patients' worlds, represent complex events or situations so as to understand them, and reflect on their own experiences in caring for the sick". (<https://guides.temple.edu/narrativemedicine>)

Charon's essay (2001) with the abundance of literature, stated that a narrative requires a teller and a listener, and by understanding and acknowledging another's narrative, medicine can be more effectively practiced through "act[ing] on the stories and plights of others" (p.1). Anyone afflicted with illness brings a story of experience leading up to the time where medical attention is needed and what happens in-between illness and healing. Over time, patient and professional journey together to assess progress in meeting the health challenge and reaching the goal of a positive outcome. Working together, listening together and acting together, patient and professional can learn from each other. Coffelt (2022) wrote, "This means the clinician, patient, or other caregivers are writing reality together—co-authoring the story of what is unfolding in real time. A true account of a patient's situation emerges from collaboration between the patient, potential caregivers, and the clinician". The reality of patient experience is key.

This paper in no way generalizes, compares, or analyzes the story related herein. It is one story of how medicine, patient, and passion led to Paul's recovery. We respectfully acknowledge each reader's personal journey through illness. The reader is invited to create meaning from the knowledge and experience of this patient. It is hoped that medical teams may apply what is learned to the context of one's practice; allowing this patient's experience to resonate within your practice and assist those you care for.

Dance and Music as Therapy: Post Surgery Recovery and Healing through the Arts

Prelude

Remember that to be happy is not to have a sky without a storm, a road without accidents, work without fatigue, relationships without disappointments. To be happy is to find strength in forgiveness, hope in battles, security in the stage of fear, love in discord. It is not only to enjoy the smile but also reflect on sadness. It is not only to celebrate the successes, but to learn from the failures. It is not only to feel happy with the applause, but to be happy in anonymity.

Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935)

Life can be unpredictable and challenging yet filled with opportunity. Who we are and who we strive to be are, in large part, self-determined. The inter-woven pieces of 'self' assist in shaping our reality and keep us bound to life. During our journey, life's challenges may disrupt this harmony. At the core of who we are is volition, drive, self-responsibility to keep moving through the circle of life and aspire to thrive and not merely survive. (Bopp, J. et al., 1985; Robbins, G. et al., 1997).

This is the story of Paul, a young, vibrant man who faced a devastating and unexpected intermission in life at the age of 19 due to a large, non-malignant brain tumor. His story is one of strength, determination, and resiliency. He is convinced that a large part of his healing, recovery, and re-building resulted from his passions for dance and music. This joint-narrative account demonstrates the connections he made re-training his mind and body to re-gain strength while retaining a spiritual resolve to remain positive and never give up on his recovery. Paul's desire to thrive was strong and self-determination was at the core of his journey.

This narrative spans a 10-year period. Paul's brother contributed to the interview process, recounting events over the past 10 years. The brothers have a strong bond and both danced with the *Yevshan Ukrainian Folk Ballet Ensemble* for 10 years. They also played together in their band for many years. First author, Kalyn serves as Chair of the Board of Directors for this semi-professional ensemble and has known these brothers for over 20 years. Her voice and recollections are included.

Paul excelled in sports, Ukrainian dancing, and music for 13 years prior to his diagnosis and surgery. He was an elite athlete and felt completely 'at home' in his body. Everything came easily to him, as he modestly shared:

I felt like I could run forever....same thing in hockey...I could skate circles around others and when I was moving down the ice to score a goal it felt like everything was in slow motion...I could just enjoy the approach to the net, think about where I would shoot, and have fun. My movements felt fluid and sharp, my mind was sharp. I could move without thinking; it was automatic for me.

Dancing and music were the same...it just came to me 'at will'. I feel that God gave me an advantage. I played guitar, piano....and our band played over 30 gigs a year. After the surgery, my body completely changed. I had to re-learn everything. I felt robotic and I had to think so hard about every movement. Just sitting up in bed two weeks after my surgery and putting my feet on the ground felt like a huge achievement and that was all I could do. I was exhausted. That's when my new journey began and I was determined to dance, play music, and sing again.

Dance Therapy

Since the early 1950s, dance therapy has emerged as a therapeutic response to both physical and psychological illness. Dance is at the core of dance movement therapy and is an inter-disciplinary profession combining the art of movement with the science of psychology. The dance therapist moves beyond the performance or technical aspects of dance to focus on how dance can significantly respond to life, growth, and change within an individual through a spectrum of movement opportunities combined with personal expression (Berrol, 1990). Dance therapy as a recognized international therapy responds to the universal tenets that dance/movement therapy can lead to and affect therapeutic change and facilitate aspects of health and well-being. The role of the dance therapist, seen as a somatic movement educator/specialist (Fortin, 2018), is to assess the individual, plan treatment, evaluate progress, improve psychological well-being, all through movement and dance (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016). Berrol (1990) explained that dance therapy combines the psyche and the soma which are intricately linked through a system of interdependent neuronal networks and “all modes of physical, cognitive, psycho-social affect each other whether under normal or pathological conditions” (p. 259).

The World Health Organization describes health as moving to a state of optimum wellness, in multiple dimensions including the physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and social and encourages a group or individual to identify personal health needs (Robbins, et al, 1997; WHO, 2016). Various psychotherapeutic disciplines, including dance therapy, recognize the inter-relationship between the mind, body, and social constructs of an individual. One's emotional history is stored within the musculature as well as other physiological body systems that present through the individual as postural, movement variations, and emotional cues as a result (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016). The goal of dance therapy is to reach the patient through therapy and motoric expression to work through feelings and emotional history with the goal of affecting positive, healthy change (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016).

Marian Chace, dancer and choreographer (1930s) researched why people danced who had no intentions of becoming professional dancers. Through personal observations her teaching of dance focused on the needs of the individual dancer with attention to improving personal self-harmony. Mental health professionals recognized her working with psychiatric patients (schizophrenic, psychotic) and soldiers returning from WWII. She followed the emotional moods and tensions of the patients and formulated movement strategies to assist patients in gaining a better sense of self through expressive movements in dance. Chace taught others the intricacies of her work and

dance therapy emerged and expanded with the goal of healing patients through dance (Chaiklin, 2016).

Dancing is an expressive movement that integrates emotion and ideas into movement. Through motoric experiences, individuals discover more about themselves and their world. Historically, individuals have danced for pleasure and purpose, to relieve trauma & stress, perfect skills, to heal, appeal to the gods, and as a statement of how one fits in the world and to deal with the pain experienced as a result of physical challenges and emotional fear (Chaiklin, 2016; Cineka & Raj, 2020; Hanna, 1995; Monteiro & Wall, 2011; Murray, 1975; Thorley, 2011).

Dancing can be described as a kinaesthetic form, a series of choreographed movements related to feelings and the dancer's role is to bring the movements to life; thereby communicating with the audience (Chaiklin 2016; Kalyn, 2006). Berrol (1990) described the human body as a medium of expression employing the skeletal structure as a determinant of the performance of physical actions, while the exertion of the muscles and the individual's intentions shape the outcome of the actions. Hanna (1995) referred to dance as "human behavior composed of, from the dancer's perspective, purposeful, intentionally rhythmical, and culturally patterned sequences of non-verbal body movements" (p. 323). Chaiklin & Wengrower (2016) discussed dance as body movement from small to large gestures and may or may not include rhythms but in general terms is, "...a motor action that emanates from an individual in response to internal sensations or perceived external stimuli" (p. xxx). Dance is powerful, cultural, holistic, highly sensory, multi-transmissional, and filled with emotion (Chaiklin, 2016; Kalyn, 2006; Monteiro & Wall, 2011). The expressive potential within dance is passionate, personal, and evocative (Kalyn, 2006).

For many, dancing is life. To dance is to express oneself in a deep and meaningful way through movement. Many believe in the spiritual healing power within dance (Cineka & Raj, 2020; Hanna, 1995; Fortin, 2018; Monteiro & Wall, 2011). Cineka & Raj (2020) shared that Indian dance has a unique healing power by its nature with multiple movements and 'Ragas' (the rhythm of a song) which serves mankind to keep strong (p. 100) while Monteiro & Wall (2011) stated that in Africa, "Dance is a conduit of individual and community healing" (p. 234). Fortin (2018) noted, "Historically, dance has been an important part of social ceremony, spiritual, social entertainments and healing rituals and in traditional cultures...art healed the individual and also the tribe" (p. 153).

Serlin (2020) posits, "The arts heal from the basic human need to create, communicate, create coherence, and symbolize" (p. 176). Human experience is represented through various art forms including kinesthetic (dance), visual (drawing, painting), verbal (poetry) and musically (Serlin 2020, Thorley, 2011) and increasingly the arts are being pursued as a healing modality in combination with other therapeutic approaches including physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, nursing, neuropsychology, and counselling for example (Berrol, 1990; Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016; Fortin, 2018; Thorley, 2011). Fortin (2018) discussed her research project

involving homeless people in participatory creative and artistic opportunities. She reported:

The medical team told the artistic team that while they can offer psychotherapy and medicine to their patients, they need other tools to help their patients cope with the burden of their symptoms...only a certain percentage of healing and curing comes from medical channels. The rest might come from psychological, emotional, social or spiritual factors, and dance can play a major role in realizing these factors. (p. 160)

Indigenous cultures embraced holism as a way of life and believe the physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions are never separated, and everything is alive, relational and connected (Chaiklin, 2016; Kalyn, 2008). Western ideologies are learning to embrace the wholeness of the human being and recognize there can be no separation amongst the dimensions and one affects the others (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016). Berrol (2016) affirmed, “In the aftermath of moderate and severe neurotrauma, all domains of human function – physical, cognitive, and psychosocial are disrupted in varying degrees” (p. 202). The arts provide ways to work through trauma, illness, and disease to improve health (Fortin, 2018; Serlin, 2020; Quinlan, 2015).

Fortin (2018) described working with neurologists implementing dance and somatic movement interventions to patients recovering from hemiplegia, whose symptoms may have included paralysis, weakness, and lack of motor control due to brain or spinal injury. The neurologist believed that dance, combined with other therapies, had the potential to address stroke patient’s cognitive, psychosocial, and physical limitations and that research on brain plasticity demonstrated that movement does contribute to the reorganization of the brain. Dance therapy is also implemented in health centers, through online zoom sessions to assist individuals with Parkinson’s disease, multiple sclerosis, and others (Fortin, 2018; *Dancing with Parkinson’s*, 2021). Providing healing opportunities through dance, improves social relationships, acknowledges trauma and emotional needs, increases mobility, challenges the brain to create and or follow movements, and empowers individuals through dance. Dancing increases blood circulation and alters brain chemicals, affects muscle and emotions, and may contribute to a sense of well-being (Berrol, 1990). These are key reasons for introducing dance ‘as’ therapy as an additional health modality (Berrol, 1990; Fortin, 2018; Hanna, 1995; Monteiro & Wall, 2011; Serlin, 2020; Thorley, 2011).

At this point, we turn to the narrative account of one young former dancer, who without knowledge of dance therapy, self-determined to *claim dance ‘as’ therapy for himself*, as he faced a long, post-recovery after traumatic brain surgery that left him a mere shadow of himself. Through three open-ended interviews, Paul re-counted his experiences spanning the past ten years. His brother, and (first author), Kalyn, contributed insights through their personal interactions within Paul’s experience.

It was important within this paper to explore dance therapy to gain an understanding of its powerful benefits and healing outcomes. Trained dance therapists understand the holistic connections between the body, mind, spirit, and emotion as they lead their

clients to better health. Some individuals may not have access to or be aware of dance therapy as a professional modality for healing. Such was the case with the dancer within this study. Exploring dance as therapy, initiated by an individual is the focus of this narrative account. Respecting dance therapy, we aim to show how the knowledge and literature relating to dance therapy was reflected through his personal experience.

Our approach is rooted in the desire to build relationship between scholarship and readers sharing personal experiences. The phenomenon of “reader resonance” (Harder, Nicol, & Martin, 2020, p. 245) joins the reader with the storied lives of others, the intellect with emotions, and invites the reader to connect meaning and knowledge through the intersection of personal experience and literature. Evocative writing and storied narrative serve to invite, engage, and inform the reader. His single story “illustrates the particular while also hinting at the universal...” (Nicol, 2006, p. 1) and is offered in recognizing the scholarship and power of personal narratives (Harder, Nicol & Martin, 2020).

Act I

While on tour in Ukraine with the *Yevshan Ukrainian Folk Ballet Ensemble*, Paul was uncharacteristically lagging behind after one of the shows while trying to arrange his costumes into his garment bag. Everyone else had left the dressing rooms for the bus so (first author) Kalyn helped him finish up and they chatted as though nothing was out of sorts; although Kalyn felt a concern.

Within a few weeks of returning home from the tour, Paul’s life was transformed:

I was in the middle of a Kinesiology lab at university when I received a call from the neurologist. He told me the MRI showed a brain tumor and everything just wentoooooh, my God it's cancer. He told me to get to the hospital immediately, so I left my class, and called my mom as I ran across campus to the hospital. I was immediately admitted and informed I had a tennis ball sized tumour attached to my brainstem, engulfing one-quarter of my brain but thankfully, it was benign. I was in surgery for 15 ½ hours. They were able to remove 80% during surgery and subsequent gamma knife procedures captured another 10%. I will live with the remainder for the rest of my life.

As a highly motivated individual, Paul was driven to dance, play music, and engage in sports. Gifted with a positive attitude, he made the best of everything, and had paid little attention to the subtle changes he was experiencing with his body as the tumor grew. Upon reflection, Paul recalled:

It was difficult to pinpoint the moment that I realized I was sick. The tumor was slow growing and it may have been growing for years which in some ways might have caused me to physically adapt to the changes I was experiencing since the symptoms were inconsistent. At times, I would have pressure in my head and one way to relieve the pressure was to have a nosebleed. Sometimes, I would hit myself in the nose to start a bleed to relieve the pressure....it was so

painful (I would write it off as that I've had this for some time or since I was little so it's just me). In soccer my skills seemed to decline. I was tripping over my feet, I couldn't pass to where I wanted to, I couldn't aim when shooting. (I attributed it to the side effects of the medication I was taking). Sometimes, I felt dizzy on the trampoline (I thought maybe I was just getting older). When I was walking, I bumped into corners and walls and I thought (Oh, I need glasses...which I did). With dancing the symptoms were subtle. I felt that my body adapted very quickly....one day, oh can't do double turns at dancing, two days later I could do it; the body is amazing and can compensate for itself (I just thought I had a couple of bad days). I still felt spatially orientated, although, thinking about it I did notice if I moved my head quickly or looked at the person beside me, I found my eyes darting back and forth to check and that made me dizzier (I thought that was the norm and I just kept going). But then, I noticed my dexterity in my right hand wasn't as good as my left when playing my guitar. I didn't know why this was happening. I found myself just strumming 1/2 time and not keeping up to the beat and that's when I started to say...hey there is something wrong here – maybe there is something serious and my justifications are not right.

Paul, remained in hospital for four weeks. There were infections, transfusions, and a shunt insertion before returning home, where with prescribed speech and physical therapy, and he embarked on the road to recovery. His body felt foreign and almost every part felt like it was asleep. He had a hard time blinking, feeling sensations, lifting his arms, finding his tongue, and wiggling his toes. Smiling was impossible. Paul eventually walked with a cane, but suffered emotional highs and lows, and was chronically exhausted. The uphill road was long and harrowing.

Paul recalls that, “My dad was stern and relentless in motivating me [with therapy] when it was tough and I'm thankful for that because it forced me to work hard every day, but then I started to accomplish goals quickly”. Paul explained that physical therapy was helpful but eventually not a sufficient challenge, noting that he would achieve a six-week exercise plan in two to three weeks. His physical therapists and doctors were excited by his accelerated recovery and they supported Paul's wish to return to Ukrainian dancing to get back into shape, fine tune coordination, and build endurance. Paul approached (first author) Kalyn two months post-surgery and asked if he could return to dancing when he was ready. I said, “Of course you can. You need to dance and the studio needs you”.

Paul shared:

In preparation, I knew that to get back to dancing I had to move more. My brother and sisters took me walking and eventually working up to a two-minute jog. They helped me so much and kept cheering me on! I tried rollerblading because I wanted to play hockey again. There was dizziness, balance issues, and exhaustion, but I wanted to keep trying. Every movement felt awkward- like a baby learning to walk with stiff legs and my left side felt normal but my right

side was off. I was constantly focusing on my body and trying to figure out a movement pattern.

Paul's return to the studio was five months post-surgery. Paul was reconnecting with both his body and friends, re-learning choreography, and filling his spirit with music and dance, all at a pace that was comfortable for him.

Act II

Rehearsal

Yevshan is a semi-professional dance company that rehearses nine hours per week. Dancing is intense and requires commitment. Dancers are drawn to the studio, to the dance, and to the others who share the stage.

Being in this body...

Walking into the studio alerts one's senses. The creaky floor speaks and the smell of dancing is in the air. Music and chatter awaken the body and the body must dance because it was born to dance. It is the dancer's instrument of struggle, pain, and great joy. It is the audience's instrument of pleasure. While rehearsing in the studio the body is never taken for granted. Dancers tell their bodies what to do, how to move. Their bodies tell them what has to be done to improve. Dancers need to be fully aware of every muscle, joint, rotation, flexion, posture, arms, hands, feet, pointed toes, heels up. The eyes are the window to their soul. Tilt the chin. This is work. Every detail must be carefully attended to. Technique must be addressed to align with the tradition of the dance. Constant relay races are conducted between the brain and the body, and are repeated over and over to burn the correct movement into the body's memory (Kalyn, 2010, p.11-12).

Upon returning to rehearsal, Paul recollected:

I've done this before, I don't 'know why it's so difficult now, but I know it's still in me. I wasn't able to do full movements but I would do parts of the movement. I remember doing 'prysiadky' and the first time I went down and then come back up putting the movements together! That was huge! I said, Okay, I can do one, to me that's muscle memory, let's try two or three in a row. It's coming back.... just down, kick, down, kick.

Chaiklin (2016) stated, "To connect dance and therapy, dancers begin with a deep understanding of their art and they explore the personal meaning of dance for themselves (p.5). When the body changes because of injury or trauma, every part of the being fights to remember and re-train to its former self. Chaiklin affirmed, "Our bodies, with the myriad of muscular, neurological, and autonomic systems respond to the dance being seen through kinesthetic recall of one's body memories" (p.6).

Prior to developing verbal language skills, humans build a kinesthetic vocabulary of movement (Chaiklin, 2016; Kalyn, Campbell, & McAvoy, 2015). This kinesthetic language emerges as body movements connect to copying, mirroring, or music for example. The body explores spaces with different forces of movement (fast, slow, gentle), and responds to relationships (with self, others, or props) which are at the heart of Laban's movement education (Pangrazi & Beighle, 2013). Movement theorist, Rudolph van Laban, believed, "...life is movement and movement is life" (Queyquep White (2016) p. 237) and encouraged dancers to reach their potential by exploring a multitude of options through movement. These may range from pre-school children exploring movement to the more sophisticated annotations of movement where those responding to dance stimulus create "muscle memory and feeling states" (p. 250). Paul reflected on the early days of his recovery:

My knees were shaky at first, and my coordination was off, similar to a child trying to walk for the first time, but the strength increased, and after a few weeks of practice, I started to notice a difference. The studio mirrors provided visual feedback that seemed to direct my brain and re-connect a physical response through a visual representation whether it was in speech therapy or in the studio dancing. I was standing in second position with arms straight out to the side. My right side was dropping a bit and I thought ok, I gotta focus a little more. I'm looking at myself in the mirror and I realized I needed to raise the weaker arm up. I wouldn't have known it was 'down' if I didn't see it in the mirror. I couldn't feel it. I knew I had to focus more and strengthen my shoulders and back. I worked on exercising at home and would come back to the studio and I could see an improvement. The physical took about three years to get to the place where I felt comfortable and satisfied. I found myself having to overcompensate with my movements. Without the mirror, I couldn't recognize a deficiency in my body's placement and execution of the movement. The mirror showed me...okay, I have to do a little bit more than 100% on my right side to make it seem normal as compared to my left. If my body on my left side was moving at 100% rate, I would have to go at least 110-115% on my right so that I would meet that new 100% level and look symmetrical with my left. My body and brain started to recognize what was required and I got a new feel for the movements.

Paul's vestibular experiences were also impacted by returning to the dance studio:

Dancing really helped with my balance and coordination. Everything came in waves: learning steps; strengthening my feet, arms, legs and core muscles; building endurance and finally lung capacity. I struggled with balance and light-headedness/dizziness which I experienced as two different things.

Paul experienced nystagmus in his right eye, an involuntary eye movement caused by abnormal function in the areas of the brain that control eye movements (2021 medlineplus.gov). Obviously, the implications for spotting and quick movements were significant. He handled the dizziness with compensation and focused on his accomplishments. He noted that his step progressions, endurance, coordination were all

feeling very promising and so he let that 'take over' his dizziness challenge and focused on the positive, bigger picture of dancing, "I just kept pushing myself to become stronger".

The relationship between dance and music is crucial to the dancers' execution of the choreography. Being completely deaf in his right ear (resulting from the surgery), Paul said it was difficult at first to hear the music:

I had to adjust to the volume and its direction which took time but learning how to cope was such a small price to pay for an unbelievable reward. I had to "feel" the music when I was dancing. Trying to be one with the music allowed me to see and experience dancing in a whole new light and always wanting to improve. Performing barre, running dances, the routines also started coming back. It was all very encouraging, so much so, I 'almost' forgot about my physical appearance.

Returning to the studio, Paul wondered what the reception would be like from the Artistic Director and his fellow dancers. His apprehensions disappeared when, "I was welcomed with open arms, warm hugs by so many; I was beyond overjoyed. I was grinning from ear to ear (even though the right side of my face was partially paralyzed) and my heart could not stop smiling".

The Artistic Director is a former professional dancer who is highly trained. He was instrumental in Paul's recovery and re-learning of the dances. Paul recalled:

He always asked me how I felt and encouraged me to stay in my comfort level. He never wanted to push me but he also provided opportunities and challenges for me. Another big piece was that neither the dancers nor the Artistic Director treated me differently in the studio because of my challenges. He would adjust his teaching and ask if I would like to do a second dance, try a solo. He challenged me but he knew I knew my limits and everyone respected that. He felt like my parent, nurturing the little kid inside of me who wanted to grow up. It was such a strong, uplifting experience to be treated as a 'whole' and part of the group again.

Fischman (2016) described a patient who suffered immense grief from a broken relationship, and affirmed that in their sessions she had to "meet the child inside the man" (p. 39) in order to help him move past the emotional and physical pain of his experience. Similarly, Paul was 'met' within the studio, at his post-surgery entry level of physicality and emotional pain, which were his new reality. The *Yevshan* dancers and the Artistic Director responded empathically and compassionately through dance and movement, intuitively utilizing dance's non-verbal therapeutic qualities. The Artistic Director used his somatic knowledge to guide Paul's movements and fellow dancers assisted by pointing out where Paul could improve his posture, steps, and other intricacies of choreography. Paul believes the emotional and physical support helped direct his progress, "They all gave me space to build up my strength and move from re-learning steps to eventually being able to complete one dance, then two, then three".

Paul's first full show was two years later. His brother noted:

Paul really knew what he had to do combined with his rehab and physical therapy because he had the dance elements and the passion. He exceeded everyone's expectations and I learned a lot from him. I learned not to take things for granted and how to drive oneself to succeed. All the dancers were blown away by his drive and accomplishments.

Chaiklin's (2016) work with patients who struggled with relationships, anger, pain, loss, sadness, and emotional trauma, included group work because working together prompts empathy and reduces the isolation of a patient's health journey. Her work also recognized moving and dancing together was an emotional experience noting, "Each individual left with a different and clearer sense of self and with having related to others when they might have previously been isolated (p. 7). Hanna (1995) stated, "Dancing can lead to feelings of identification or inclusion in a culture or group, which strongly reduces stress and alienation while the music and acting through music may also be therapeutic" (p. 325). Berrol (2016) agreed, "There is a shared energy and strength when being with others and moves us beyond our personal limitations or concerns. Within the joy of moving together, we also experience the validations of our own worth and recognition of our personal struggles" (p. 5).

Perhaps as Paul interacted within the dance studio; the Artistic Director and dancers observed what he had physically and emotionally 'lost' in his dance and what had to be re-learned. The dancers may have experienced kinesthetic empathy (Fischman, 2016), learning to understand, and even experience, some of Paul's challenges. The dancers' understanding of body awareness and their subsequent response to Paul's studio experiences contributed to his healing, recovery and growth. Realizing how significant a loss he experienced, they provided encouragement, support, and an inclusive environment. Experiencing this intuitive care from fellow dancers was therapeutic. One dancer offered this encouragement directly to Paul, "Man, you're doing better than me and I'm at 100% [capability]". Tagging the comment with, "It's great to have you back in the studio", gave a great deal of strength to Paul.

Fischman (2016) pointed out that acting as a partner during dance therapy, in response to the needs of the patient, builds an element of trust, safety and a healthy environment. As a dance therapist "facilitates the self-development of a client" (p. 33) they must be "open to one's inner sensations and feelings and be aware of what is familiar in one's own movement" (p. 33). The dance therapist becomes empathically involved in an intersubjective experience that is rooted in the body" (p. 34) with the goal of relieving human suffering. As therapist and patient work together to co-construct the process they work reciprocally to promote health and healing.

Similarly Paul, choosing dance as therapy is aided by the Artistic Director and peers who "affect each other consciously and unconsciously" (Fischman, 2016, p.36). Loss and sadness can be universally shared (Chaiklin, 2016) and neuroscience affirms "the ability to understand others is rooted in the nature of our interactions" (Fischman, p. 46) and the way we understand each other as human beings. Although the Artistic Director &

dancers did not consider themselves dance therapists nor had any of the specialized training required of dance therapists, their actions had notable therapeutic effects on Paul.

ACT III

The Stage

The stage was calling Paul:

My dancing and music acted as therapy for me. I made the decision to get back to them both as soon as was possible. They are passions that I can't live without. They bring me such peace. I felt so calm again when I danced and the music led me there. My mind becomes still when I dance and play music. These two things make me happy and I just enjoy life. Once my skills returned, I didn't have to think so hard. It was like the movements were coming back 'at will' as before surgery. Dancing and music are about my health. Physically, dancing keeps me in shape and builds muscle memory; music challenges my brain. It builds creative capacities and keeps the mind sharp. I was strengthened in so many ways as a result of returning to dancing and playing my music. I do feel a sense of accomplishment and I feel like I can do anything now – I'm on top of the world. The art of dance and music gave me back my strength and built my confidence. It gave me back my life.

Dancing and playing music both require a 'giving of self' as a performer. It takes hard work and brings pleasure to those who give and to those who receive.

November 12th, 2010, just over one full year since the surgery, was my chance to perform a 2-act show, featuring most of our repertoire and a lengthy folk ballet. I felt the team atmosphere behind stage, the crowd, family watching, the anticipation of the curtain rising and shivers ran across my entire body. Everyone worked so hard for this moment; I couldn't help but get emotional. Dancing to a live orchestra combined my two passions! Dancing and music go hand in hand. The music brings out the emotion in me and allows me to transfer that emotion into my body and then execute those feelings and energy through the dance. The music provides syncopations, different timings and rhythms, and calls the body to move in response to these differences. I feel these in my body through the dance. I also transfer these to my music when I play guitar. I hear these rhythms that I danced to and apply them to my playing. It gives me such joy to see the music our band plays bring a festive experience to a crowd through our repertoire. I don't think I realized the magnitude of that performance at the time, but looking back on it 10 years later, what an incredible time shared and a moment that really helped kickstart a personal list of what I wanted to accomplish in my life.

During the dance performances, (first author) Kalyn worked the wings during shows attending to the dancers and their needs. When Paul exited the stage, she gave him a

big, affirming hug amidst a few tears. He was overjoyed but confided, “but Pani [teacher] Brenda....my smile”. Moving through the trauma of recovery for Paul was a process of mourning the losses he experienced as a result of the surgery. Paul *was* smiling and although it wasn’t the ‘old’ smile it was a great smile....the new 100%!

Resiliency

Paul’s strength and personal drive was evident as he fought to gain his health back through dance and music. Macdonald (2016) described resiliency as a process and “... the ability to bounce back and resume life with some normality” (p. 185). Serlin (2020) described resiliency further:

Resiliency grows with enhanced self-management skills and more wisdom. It is helped by supportive relationships with parents, peers and others, as well as through cultural beliefs and spiritual traditions. Developed across the lifespan, resiliency is marked by close relationship with family and friends, a positive view of oneself and confidence in one’s strengths and abilities, the ability to manage strong feelings and impulses, and good problem-solving and communication skills. Additionally, the ability to seek help and find resources, seeing oneself as resilient rather than as a victim, coping with stress in healthy ways and avoiding harmful coping strategies, helping others, and finding positive meaning in life despite difficult or traumatic events is helpful. Qualities that build resiliency include optimism, joy and compassion. The use of the arts and particularly dance/movement, builds resilience at the body level.
(<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10465-020-09335-6>)

When asked where he thinks tenacity and resilience comes from, Paul’s personal philosophy appeared to reflect the literature. He always came back to his choice and positivity in how he reacted to his challenges:

I recall telling my mom and dad I was just going in for a day surgery and I’ll be back in Kinesiology quickly...take notes again, listen to my Professor’...I couldn’t understand why my family was quiet and hesitant. At times they were all crying and I said, ‘I don’t know why you are crying...I’m ok...it’s a tumor – not cancer- they’ll take it out...It’s another day at the office’. The doctor said I might lose my hearing, some dexterity which did concern me about playing my guitar but I chose not to focus on the negatives. Maybe that was a blessing not to know what was coming but I felt like I was not going to let it get me down. I wasn’t flippant but I just really thought it would all be ok. I had bad days, but I didn’t ever feel defeated. There were no limits to the recovery, and I strongly believed not knowing how far I could reach was exciting!

During those first weeks of recovery Paul’s body felt robotic:

I had to think about every movement. If I wanted to lift my arm I would have to look at my arm and tell myself ‘you have to lift this’. I knew my fingers had to clench or move to grab something and I would talk to my hand to do the work.

It was about two and half weeks into recovery and I thought about the tumor occupying 25% of my brain and now that it was mostly gone, I felt this open space and that my brain was 'shifting back'. I told my parents 'don't move, this is the weirdest feeling'. My fever and headache were gone and all of a sudden I didn't have to think about my arm – I could raise it without thinking, touch my nose and put it back down. This lasted for about two or three hours where I felt like I could get out of bed and run and do what I did before. I felt like everything was going to be okay and if I listen to the doctors and nurses and follow instructions I will get out of the hospital, do the rehab, and I'll be able to be back to 100% of myself. I remember that moment. The fever and pain returned shortly after but I knew I could do it in time.

There were severe challenges. His brother recalls nightly family vigils staying by Paul's side. Paul had nightmares, unsettled experiences and "if we just held his hand and let him squeeze back we would reassure him that he was surrounded by love and protected."

Paul reflected:

During my physical therapy there was a point when I could actually pick up my guitar and I tried to play something for my therapist and it was awful! I laughed at myself. I knew what this song sounded like before my surgery and I knew I needed to work on fingering, chording, strumming, rhythm. Because of my love for it I practiced every day – this was part of my life. My right hand wasn't moving quickly anymore. I challenged myself with the piano and I had to re-organize my brain...my wave pattern within my brain to play what I want to with my right hand but play it with my left hand. I retaught myself how to play chords and solo with the left hand on the keyboard.

Whether dancing to music or playing the music, Paul becomes energized:

Hearing the music in the studio is second nature and goes with the choreography. It makes everything around you electric and you think of nothing else – you just go with the movement. Music makes you feel at peace and free. The music comes in and moves outward through the whole body. It is just in us and has to come out! The guitar is my instrument. I have had years to improve my dexterity. Holding the pick came with challenges after the surgery. I did not have the strength to keep it from slipping out of my hands. Lactic acid builds up in my forearm by the end of a song, the wrist gets fatigued a lot quicker. I focus on these things throughout the night a little more than one would think. I finally found picks that suit my strumming style, and I tailor them to really enjoy those moments. I am eager to learn new tapping techniques with my left hand to make up for some of the missed strums with my right hand. When executed, this makes for a unique sound. A respected musician complimented me on my new technique and that tells me I am improving. I sing and play keyboard too. I try and listen more intently when it comes to vocal harmonies; there is no sweeter sound. I taught myself how to play lead on keys

with the left hand. Instrumental harmonizing with our fiddle player adds to the diversity giving us options for the various songs we play. At the end of the day, when you love something so much, you are going to find a way to make it work. I feel extremely blessed.

His brother noted:

Paul is phenomenal at chording but he's now basically playing backwards. Learning note by note with his right hand he transfers this into his left hand. He takes a mirror image of his right hand and then flips it; applying it with his left. Whatever he would hit with his thumb on the right hand he hits with his pinkie on his left. After about two months, he played the guitar for his physio again and was able to play the correct chords with an improved strumming pattern!

Paul's physical healing involved intense emotional responses:

Healing physically had a direct relationship with my emotional responses. There would be tremendous highs and lows through recovery and learning to control my emotional responses was challenging. Moving from tears, to anger, to joy happened with a snap of the fingers. I think it took about 10 years to settle into coping with a better emotional response to the challenges. I know that counselling therapy was vital in this process. They pose questions to help you realize the answer you need to apply [in your life]. Being able to sit with a counsellor and 'let everything go' was great.

The Smile

Smiling is an expectation in Ukrainian dance because the dance is joyous and should look effortless.. Paul struggled with not being able to smile as he had before:

My physical appearance; knowing I can't smile. I meet someone and want to smile...this was one of the hardest things to deal with. I had to learn how to smile through my eyes. It was about 5 days after my surgery and I was in ICU. My mom was with me but I saw someone else in the room. She told me there was nobody there and to rest. Being stubborn, I moved my darting eyes back and forth and they locked with this woman who had silver hair. She didn't say anything, she just had this Mona Lisa kind of look with a half-smile. I recall wondering if that was what I will be looking like [half-smile] but I felt right then that everything was going to be okay. I think that's what she was trying to tell me without saying the words. She turned around, took two steps, and then just disappeared. That gave me a lot of comfort and a positive outlook and I said 'I'm gonna be able to keep going with it and I'm gonna be able to achieve what I want to'. Some say it was the drugs doing things to my brain, but I know it was real.

Encore

What lies behind you and what lies in front of you, pales in comparison to what lies inside of you. (Ralph Waldo Emerson as cited in Macdonald, 2016).

An encore is typically preceded by an applause and acts as a request by an audience for the artistic person/s to ‘come back’ and ‘give more’. The word seems fitting as Paul slowly returned to his passions within the arts.

Within this narrative account of Paul’s post-surgery recovery, we shared his experience as he chose dance and music to support his recovery. Paul experienced immense trauma with the loss of his body, his dancing, his music, and his social world. He used dance *as his therapy* and the Artistic Director and his fellow dancers responded in therapeutic ways; assisting Paul through his journey.

Fischman (2016) explained, “Embodiment implies revitalizing the body, re-establishing the enactive sensory-perceptive connection and recovering the possibility of accessing the emotional wealth present in the unfolding of life” (p.38). When there is trauma to the brain all aspects of the individual are affected in some form including, “personality, behavior, cognition, emotions, physical attributes” (Berrol, 2016, p. 202). Recovery is a slow, complicated process and may span years.

Dance therapists are often dancers themselves and understand on an “intuitive level” (Chaiklin, 2016, p. 5) what scientific research has begun to demonstrate about the therapeutic qualities of dance. The first connection is with the art form of dance and includes the personal, values, and meaning within one’s dancing. Dance is more than technique, exercise, and performance. It goes deeper to a sharing of one’s passion feelings, energy, and desire to externalize outwardly something from within one’s-self (Chaiklin, 2016; Kalyn, 2010). There is a shared energy and strength when dancing with others. Chaiklin (2016) stated, “Within the joy of moving together, we also experience the validation of our own worth and recognition of our personal struggles” (p.5).

Ellis (1923) wrote, “If we are indifferent to the art of dancing we have failed to understand, not merely the supreme manifestation of physical life, but also the supreme symbol of spiritual life” (p. 36). Chaiklin (2016) stated, “Contemporary dance therapy remains committed to the physical, emotional, and spiritual components” (p. 4). She furthers that dancing with others creates a sense of community through shared dance experiences which fosters expression through dance and builds relationships. As Paul made a choice to use *dance as therapy* in his recovery journey, he demonstrated through his personal experience what has been reflected throughout the literature. As noted by Hartley (2004), “What we need in order to transform our sickness into health, and our confusion into wisdom, lies essentially within us, and not [only] in the hands of the doctor, therapist, priest or healer (p. 2).

Paul’s closing thoughts on his experiences:

I know it is a cliché that you can achieve anything you put your mind to as long as you put in the energy and never-give-up attitude. If you stay positive and you see the good in every negative, you learn from the experience. I celebrate little accomplishments and stay humble and kind. With all that, you'll be able to achieve whatever you want. That's what I focused on to get me through. I remember the day when I finally chucked my cane into the corner. It's still sitting there, just as a reminder, so I don't forget what I came through. On days when I feel a bit down it's a reminder.

Paul is an inspiration. He motivates others through his example and encourages personal bests:

Before the surgery, all that I experienced in life felt easy for me and I was 'coasting' through my first 18 years. I never really stopped to smell the roses. After the surgery, I realized life is difficult, life has bumps and challenges. I felt like I had to be re-born and I got a second chance. Now, I try to pay it forward. If you just be a good, kind, gentleman, life is gonna turn around and give you something great in the end. It's cool for me to make sense of that now. This experience opened my eyes. You learn to really hang on and cherish your support system and to make the most of the time you have together. If someone is reading this, I would say 'don't coast' through life. Go and hug your son, daughter, your family. Wish someone 'safe travels', do something randomly special for your significant other. Little things are really big things in the end. Try something extra-ordinary! Have a sense of hope and when things get tough, get back on the horse as quickly as possible. Never forget to laugh. There were really tough days and everyone around me gave me hope and lifted me up in their own way. My family, my dancing, the studio, my Artistic Director, my fellow dancers, the musicians, my medical team, and those who danced when I played, all made a difference to my emotional well-being which inter-twined with my body, spirit, and intellect. When I danced the audience fed my soul. That final pose after a show was confirming 'I was back' and it felt so good. Always remember your support system, what they did for you, where you came from, and what you still can accomplish. Life is beautiful.

Critical Reflection

The introduction to this paper invited the reader into Paul's journey and his story of recovery. We recognize that not all journeys experienced are the same. We would posit that Paul is extraordinary in his positivity and his contagious attitude. He had an extraordinary family, community, medical team, and resources to assist him through this journey which was not without great struggle and challenges over the years. Paul's thoughts on 'being able to achieve whatever you want' or 'whatever you put your mind to' are simply his approach to life. He knows the limitations that are couched within these statements, because he has lived them. His journey was in no way glamorous; nor has he conquered every obstacle to this day as he continues to "celebrate little accomplishments". His message and journey are about hope and he recognizes that not

everyone who struggles through illness or traumatic events will achieve the same outcomes.

There are a myriad of challenges facing each individual on their road to recovery. It is important to recognize every small achievement along the journey. The pathway you are challenged to journey is unique to your life and not everyone will be able to get up and dance again. Sometimes, the challenges do not allow the body to live what the spirit dreams. Not everyone will be recognized through awards seen by the public; however, every personal achievement is an award and as pointed out by Pessoa (1888–1935) in the Prelude of this paper, “It is not only to feel happy with the applause, but to be happy in anonymity” – that quiet, private space where one recognizes that small achievements can be huge milestones on the road to recovery. Hope may come with limitations and the reality is there are, in some cases, obstacles too large to navigate. Paul would be the first to applaud any achievement and encourage peace within.

As Harder, Nicol, & Martin (2020) discussed the phenomena of “reader resonance” (p. 245), our goal in this paper was to engage the reader with the storied life of Paul. You were invited to create meaning from his particular story. It is natural to compare one’s personal journey of recovery and recognize that not all journeys are universal in their outcome. As contributors, we humbly respect every person’s journey as they navigate extraordinary challenges.

It is hoped that medical teams will have learned from Paul’s experience and connect meaning and knowledge from his journey. Perhaps somewhere in your practices, this meaning will resonate for you and through your patients in meaningful ways.

Post-Script

Paul continued to dance with *Yevshan* for five more years before retiring from the company. He taught Ukrainian dancing to youth, ages 5 to 15 for 10 years and has continued to play regular engagements with his band mates for the past 16 years.

In 2019, Paul was awarded the *Youth Leadership Award of Excellence* by the United Canadian Congress Recognition Committee. This award recognizes leadership, knowledge, excellence and self-less contributions to the Ukrainian Community.

In February 2022, the *Yevshan Ukrainian Folk Ballet Ensemble* celebrated its 60th Anniversary with a gala event. As *Yevshan* alumni, Paul and his brother stood on stage alongside their band members for the celebration and played for the 320 guests who revelled in their music. (first author) Kalyn observed, “ Paul was in fine form and it was a joy to see him on stage – healthy, smiling, and doing what he loves”.

*“I will keep playing music for a lifetime and the dance will always be inside of me” ~
Paul*

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The *Yevshan Ukrainian Folk Ballet Ensemble* was created in 1960 with the goal of preserving, interpreting and expressing historical and contemporary Ukrainian cultural values for public enjoyment through technical and artistic excellence in the art form of dance. *Yevshan* has thrilled audiences throughout the world, including performances in England (Royal Albert Hall in London) Sweden (Umea and Stockholm), Ukraine, Cuba, Chile, Croatia, and the United States performing in cities such as New York, San Diego, (Featured on NBC today show), Las Vegas, and Disney World Florida. *Yevshan* has toured Canada on several occasions, performed at two World Fairs, and has thrice danced for Her Majesty, the late Queen Elizabeth II.

www.yevshan.com