The oscillating self: dance, Feldenkrais, and maturation

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The Oscillating Self:
Dance, Feldenkrais, and Maturation

Annie Rudnik

Submitted to the Department of Dance
of Smith College in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Dr. Candice Salyers, Faculty Adviser

April 19, 2015
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April 20, 2015

Dear Reader,

When I interviewed for this graduate program I knew already what my thesis topic and performance would be. I had a project ten years in the making and I wanted to use this opportunity to begin the conclusion of what I had been working on. From what I hear, this sort of certainty, especially at the beginning of the MFA process, is quite unusual, but then again, so is having a decade-worth of research. When I consider the past two years of this program and my thesis process as it unfolded, I remember something my former co-worker Debbie used to say, “Humans plan...and God laughs.”

In any life endeavor, the road you take might always leads you down an unexpected twist or two or more. This journey most certainly has.

From 2004 until his death in 2013, I recorded oral histories with former Vaudevillian Harold Cromer. I also learned and performed his songs and dances on street corners and in jazz clubs. We became friends during my first year of undergrad and our friendship deepened with weekly phone calls, every Tuesday, until he died. Harold asked me to be his biographer in 2005. I planned to use this thesis opportunity to write a few chapters of the Harold Cromer biography and make a performance homage to his memory. I spent the summer before my thesis year looking over this decade of research, listening to hours of audio recordings and reading transcripts from my oral histories with Harold, watching videos from other researchers and perusing his paper archive as well. As I dug into Harold’s life story I began to see a complexity of life in a way I hadn’t before. In re-listening to the recordings I heard long stretches of time with Harold stuck in a cycle of suspicions and anger, or times where Harold performed

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storytelling, not to me, but to an imagined audience, and I found discrepancies in his stories between his own telling and retelling. By the end of the summer I felt ashamed for my younger self. I wish I had had the courage or insight to cut through Harold’s games and opinions to get to the “truth.” But truth is slippery. Truths hold nuances and paradox. In the act of historiography, nuances and paradoxes sometimes get smoothed away. What I discovered was a story quite different than expected. I finished the summer feeling confused and frustrated with the stories I planned to tell.

A good interviewer learns how to guide her subject down an unexpected twist to reveal some new information. A great interview leads the subject to feel so open that she says something from so deep in her body, she never even knew she believed it. The best interviewers can lead their subjects gently into a state of sensitivity and vulnerability rarely felt in daily life. And by witnessing this interview, the audience learns not only about the subject, but about life itself. Studs Terkel, the father of oral history, is my long time idol. He was able to lead his subject down a deep and winding path inward, even when his subject was himself. In many ways, I researched for this thesis by interviewing myself. Like a great interview, I discovered many thoughts and beliefs that live so deep in my tissue that I didn’t know them until they were said. I led myself into states of sensation and vulnerability with the belief that the deeper in I can dig, the wider I can reach.

The paper that follows is about self, vulnerability, and the potency of uncertainty for learning and growth. There are four main sections. The first is an introduction to self, identity, and art-making by looking at multiple theories of a changing, kaleidoscopic sense of self. The second section is a personal narrative about the only time Harold and
I danced on stage together. The third section is a look at the assumed benefits of Feldenkrais for a dancer. The final section is about oscillations, a movement-impulse universal in nature and sometimes art. At the beginning of each section is a quote by Moshe Feldenkrais. I became a certified Feldenkrais Practitioner in 2013. The Feldenkrais Method is a way of awareness and thought that promotes greater adaptability in all aspects of life. The Feldenkrais Method has influenced my worldview and you may witness this in my writing. I hope the following words will come to you as a study of human maturation.

Sincerely,

Annie Rudnik
“We act in accordance to our self-image.”
- Moshe Feldenkrais
Self as a Process

“Nothing seems more obvious than who or what is a people. Peoples have familiar names. They seem to have long histories. Yet as one poses the open-ended question ‘what are you?’ to individuals presumably belonging to the same ‘people’, the responses will be incredibly varied. Passionate debates hinge around names. People shoot each other every day over the question of labels. And yet, the very people who do so tend to deny that the issue is complex or puzzling or indeed anything but self-evident. Floyd Cochran sought a community to solidify his unstable identity. The delusion of a solid identity, the illusion of purity, echoes an aversion to the impure—a hatred of the weak and the foreign. The delusion of a solid identity assuages the potent fear, held by the individual and reinforced by so much of his social environment.

Fear #1: of the complexity of language
Fear #2: of the kaleidoscopic self

-- Matthew Goulish, 39 Microlectures

Many self-help books, spiritual practices, and personal dogmas stem from the question, “Who am I?” or more accurately, the realization, “I am not who/what I thought I was.” We have come to know this storyline through movies and books. You think you know yourself, you’re on a stable path, things are solid, reliable and on schedule, until something shifts, goes askew, and it all falls down. Shame and vulnerability researcher, Brené Brown cheekily calls this moment in her life her Breakdown Spiritual Awakening. When her realization struck, she knew that she had to change course. Brené Brown put down her research and headed into therapy.

1 Floyd Cochran is the former spokesperson of the Aryan Nations, a white supremacy organization. He left the Aryan Nations in 1992 after other members suggested that Cochran’s son, born with a cleft palate, should be euthanized because of his deformation. D’Antonio, “Up From Hatred.”


3 Brené Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are. (City Center: Hazelden, 2010), xii.
What makes an identity, a self? How do I know myself? How do I introduce myself to others? As Goulish points out in the above quote, “Who are you?” is an open-ended question. Depending on the circumstance in which the question is posed, one might answer with her name, or her profession, or her status in the group, or any number of identifying values. Perhaps you have some practiced phrases that you return to often. Is there change in how you name yourself? Is there change in how you feel yourself?

Neurologist Anthony Damasio writes, “There is indeed a self, but it is a process, not a thing, and the process is present at all times when we are assumed to be conscious.” While the idea of a singular self, a thing that we can hold, know, and show, is quite engrained in our culture, it may not be accurate. What may be more true is the way performer and writer Matthew Goulish puts it, the “kaleidoscopic self.” A self that is filled with ever changing colors and combinations, continuously morphing. In the above quote, Goulish portrays a person unable to cope with a kaleidoscopic self, so he joins a group to be with his “people.” But he finds that in a group he is still an individual in his own unique process and he must cope with the sense of his changing self. Brené Brown experienced this in herself as she found her values shift. The characteristics she thought as honorable including high-achieving, goal-oriented, and stoic behavior, she found through her research, did not create the wholehearted person she valued. She shifted her own course and entered a process to reroute her habits. For Brené Brown this was, perhaps, one of many comings-of-age that may occur during her lifetime.

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Instead of single moment of growth, there may be a continual shifting of ourselves in relation to the changing present.

I must admit, when I realized that my line of questioning follows, in some way, the “coming-of-age” type story, I laughed and then I felt sick. I hear these stories all the time. They come through pop culture on the conveyer belt of Oprah’s book club straight into the lap of the current stay-at-home mom. It is now cliché to have an epiphany, change course, and become a better, healthier, more fulfilled person. But, maybe we actually don’t hear these stories enough, life is way more complicated than we often let on. Major life changes happen many times to every healthy person. It was that sort of coming-of-age growth that set me to my inquiry. Let’s be clear, though, I am not inquiring about a coming-of-age, but rather comings-of-age. I seek to understand the “kaleidoscopic self.” I seek to know: How do people construct a sense of self? In what ways does self change over time? What interferes with our ability to adapt? I ask these questions not only as a curious individual but as a dancer and Feldenkrais practitioner.

The Feldenkrais Method is a somatic form of learning created by physicist and engineer Moshe Feldenkrais. The term somatics comes from the Greek root “soma” which means pertaining to the body. This term was first coined in the 1970’s by philosopher and professor Thomas Hanna upon meeting Moshe Feldenkrais. Somatics has become an umbrella term to encompass many modalities that “heighten both sensory and motor awareness to facilitate a student-client’s own self-organization, self-healing, and self-knowing.”5 The Feldenkrais Method is practiced in both a one-on-one

setting called *Functional Integration* and a group class setting called *Awareness Through Movement*. In each setting, teachers take students through a series of movement patterns. The lessons are often subtle and the teacher asks her students to sense themselves more deeply in order to notice their habits. In the Feldenkrais Method students learn to sense themselves more precisely in order to more precisely do that which you wish.

Moshe Feldenkrais writes, “We act in accordance to our self-image.”

6 Feldenkrais thought that all the ways in which we interact with the world (think, feel, sense, move) are integrated. In fact, one cannot think, feel, sense, or move without doing them all. For instance, when I speak I gesticulate. The gestures I make with my hands are tied to my thought process and speech. According to Feldenkrais, these ways in which we interact with the world are directed by our self-image, or how one thinks of herself, that is, thought in a conscious and sub-conscious manner. Feldenkrais writes, “Each one of us speaks, moves, thinks, and feels in a different way, each according to the image of himself that he has built up over the years. In order to change our mode of action we must change the image of ourselves that we carry within us. What is involved here, of course, is a change in the dynamics of our reactions, and not the mere replacing of one action by another. Such change involves not only a change to our self-image, but a change in the nature of our motivations, and the mobilization of all the parts of the body concerned.”

7 He goes on to write, “These conditions cause the majority of adults today

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to live behind a mask, a mask of personality that the individual tries to present to others and to himself."\(^8\)

According to the Feldenkrais Method, how one thinks of herself influences how one acts, and by studying one’s actions through noticing voluntary and involuntary pre-movements and movements, she changes her self-image. But, most people find change and self-reflection too scary to face. Often humans try to hold on to a single version of self, but the idea of a singular self is a fallacy.

In his book *The Evolving Self*, psychologist Robert Kegan brings to mind the philosopher Hegel to explain his viewpoint on the self.

Kegan writes, “‘The spirit,’ wrote Hegel in the preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind*, ‘is never at rest but always engaged in ever progressive motion, in giving itself a new form.’ This motion is the subject of this book. The book is a reckoning of the nature of these forms and the experience of restless creativity. It is about the courage and the costs which we discover again and again in giving ourselves a new form.”\(^9\)

But, what is it we need to be in tune with our evolving, kaleidoscopic self? How might one adapt?

Feldenkrais says that in order to adapt, one must appreciate herself as an individual. He wrote, “It is important to understand that if a man wishes to improve his self-image, he must first of all learn to value himself as an individual, even if his faults as

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a member of society appear to him to outweigh his qualities."\textsuperscript{10} Robert Kegan states that not only must one notice herself as an individual, but she must also be recognized as an individual by others. He writes, “The need to be seen, to be recognized, however it changes in the complexity of its form, may never change in its intensity.”\textsuperscript{11} Being seen as an individual is indeed a human need throughout one’s life. Brené Brown declares, “Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing we will ever do.”\textsuperscript{12} Brown argues that the ability to say “this is who I am,” not “this is who I was,” nor “this is who I hope to be,” nor “this is what I know,” is the lynchpin of building a full, wholehearted life. And, I argue, that the “am” self, your present self, is a changing self. What you were and what you hope to be may be static in your mind, but who you are at any given time may be changing and dynamic. Brown says, “What we know matters, but who we are matters more. Being rather than knowing requires showing up and letting ourselves be seen.”\textsuperscript{13}

All people struggle in recognizing themselves as individuals and letting their individuality being seen by others, including artists. Often we relate to artwork by grouping it with other work we have seen. “Do you know the band The Dismemberment Plan?” “No?! Well, they are kind of a mix between The Clash and David Bowie.” It is difficult to get through the classifications that get put onto our artwork. In order to find and demonstrate one’s individuality, one must have the self-awareness to sense their

\textsuperscript{10} Feldenkrais, \textit{Awareness}, 19.

\textsuperscript{11} Kegan, \textit{Self}, 18.

\textsuperscript{12} Brown, \textit{Imperfection}, ix.

own desires and the courage to stand out and allow their uniqueness to be seen. “We abdicate artistic decision-making to others when we fear that the work itself will not bring us the understanding, acceptance and approval we seek,”14 artists David Bayles and Ted Orland warn in their book *Art and Fear*. If one can find the courage to take ownership of one’s own artistic decision-making, then one might find a way out of habit and into a more dynamic kaleidoscopic self. Psychiatrist Silvino Arieti explains, “Creativity is one of the major means by which the human being liberates himself from the fetters not only of his conditioned responses, but also of his usual choices.”15 I believe that art is a reflection of the artist. The more freedom one finds in her art-making, the more freedom one may feel in life, the more adaptable one may be in her art-making, the more adaptability one may have in her self-image.

But, this is easier to say than to do. An artist can feel separate from her artwork, especially through discouragement, boredom, and self-loathing. Separation between oneself and one’s art makes the creative process much more trying. In his book *Free Play* Stephen Nachmanovitch writes, “The workmanlike attitude is inherently non-dualistic---we are one with our work. If I act out of a separation of subject and object---I, the subject, working on *it*, the object---then my work is something other than myself; I will want to finish it quickly and get on with my life,”. He continues, “But if art and life are one, we feel free to work through each sentence, each note, each color, as though we

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had infinite amounts of time and energy.”  

If oneself is the same as one’s art, then one might get lost in the process of creation and in the enjoyment of the process of life.

Even as a dancer, in which my body, my self, is my medium, it is easy to fall out of the workmanlike attitude as described by Nachmanovitch. It is easy to begin to make something that feels separate from myself, something to do, rather than something to feel. Somatics can help dancers and all people connect themselves to their creativity. Scholar Mark Evans states, “[Somatic training] creates a concept of dance as a form of critically reflective practice that enables the student, at least as a starting point in her practice to become more like herself through movement.”  

Perhaps embodiment is a key to finding one’s self. Kegan writes, “Meaning is, in its origins, a physical activity (grasping, seeing), a social activity (it requires another), a survival activity (in doing it, we live). Meaning, understood in this way, is the primary human motion, irreducible. It cannot be divorced from the body, from social experience, or from the very survival of the organism.”  

One’s very meaning and sense of self is connected to one’s embodied experience. But to sense one’s physical self deeply is a vulnerable act, because it strips away outside protection and projections and leaves one with just oneself, singular and mortal. But still it may get us to the truth of our self-creating process. Evans writes, “To be alert to one’s vulnerability and aware of one’s own functioning and yet still to function with confidence requires a particular openness to experience, an ability to tell a


19 Arzy, Thut, Mohr, Michel, and Blanke, “Neural Basis,” 8074-8081.
complex truth about what it means to perform through the body.”

And through experiencing truth one might embody a deep and fulfilling existence. As Brené Brown declares, “Vulnerability is the core, the heart, the center, of meaningful human experiences.”

In this research, I pull from the fields of neurology, psychology, social work, somatics, and art to understand the creative process of self. I search for ways to become more creative, wholehearted, and adaptable. And I search for greater self-knowledge. Feldenkrais described the healthiest people as those most resilient, able to adapt to change. He wrote, “Most artists, be they cobblers or sculptors, composers or virtuosos, poets or scientists, like good wine, are best when they are old. The outstanding difference between such healthy people and the others is that they have found by intuition, genius, or had the luck to learn from a healthy teacher, that learning is the gift of life. A special kind of learning: that of knowing oneself. They learn to know ‘how’ they are acting and thus are able to do ‘what’ they want---the intense living of their unavowed and sometimes declared, dreams.”

I ask these questions because I, too, experienced a recent Breakdown Spiritual Awakening during which I realized that the story I was telling others about myself was habitual and untrue. I was not acting courageous, truthful, or vulnerable. And I experienced an “I am not who/what I thought I was” moment. How do people construct a sense of self? In what ways does self change over time? What interferes with our ability

20 Evans, “Dancing with Socrates.” 120.


to adapt? I expect that my coming-of-age experience is one of many comings-of-age throughout my life. We are, after all, a progressively moving process, a kaleidoscopic self. And this kaleidoscopic self wishes to live her unavowed dreams.
“If you know what you are doing, you can do what you want.”
- Moshe Feldenkrais
A Dance with Harold

“There comes a time in everyone’s life when you must be reborn,” Harold declared after he took stage for our first and only performance as a song and dance duo.

Harold and I were an odd couple. Harold was born in the 1920’s; I was born in the 1980’s. Harold is the descendent of American slaves and plantation owners; I am the descendent of European farmers and bankers. Harold grew up in Hell’s Kitchen, New York City; I grew up in the Chicago suburbs. Harold never finished high school; I am earning a Master’s degree. Harold is black; I am white. Harold is a talker; I am a listener. But, Harold is a performer and I am a performer. We met at the first tap dance performance I attended in New York City. It was 2004 and I was 18 years old. Harold struck up a conversation and we became instant friends.

In January 2012, Chris, the director and host of Secret City, invited me to perform with Harold at his event. Secret City is a church, of sorts, for artists. It uses the church ritual of gathering, meditating, listening, and singing, but exchanges the words “magic” and “transformation” for any reference to “God”. It happens every month in a theatre on the lower East Side of New York City. For the year I lived in New York City, this artists’ church saved me. It gave me refuge from my cramped, anonymous, isolating existence.
of a New Yorker. I planned to return to see Harold and I scheduled my visit in order to also catch the Secret City service; and then Chris invited me and Harold to perform at that service.

Harold is Harold “Stumpy” Cromer. He was a Vaudeville performer best known for his duo Stump and Stumpy; a Broadway performer who sang and danced alongside Ethel Merman; an emcee for the first Rock ‘n’ Roll shows with Buddy Holly and LaVern Baker; a radio personality on the Steve Allen Show; and a regular of television and film. He was also a tap dance master and mentor to several young students. I met Harold as a young student at Sarah Lawrence College. I was a dancer, historian, and activist.

Harold and I had never performed together. He performed with other young dancers whom he mentored, or he performed solo. Me, I was his “autobiographer.” I was his observer and notator. I recorded stories with Harold. We had a unique relationship. Harold sometimes called me “the writer” to other tap dancers. He spoke, I listened. I recorded, I notated, I tried to understand. In fact, after beginning to record his story, I started to tap dance on the streets. Harold began his career dancing on street corners and so in an attempt to make sense of his experience, I too took to the streets. I performed as field research.

I started on National Tap Dance Day, May 25th, 2004, in downtown Chicago on Michigan Avenue. I wore a striped blazer, a bowler hat, a skirt and a homemade t-shirt
that read “Happy Birthday, Bojangles!” I tap danced enthusiastically on raw concrete, leaving marks of my dancing directly on the sidewalk. When people stopped to talk about my dancing, I told them about Harold, his performing, mentorship, and inspiration. I told them that I dance on the streets because he had. On my first day, employees from the Ralph Lauren store took breaks from working to watch me dance, passersby joined me shuffling, a young beat reporter interviewed me for a potential Tribune story, a talent agent passed me her card and a priest gave me ten dollars. As I danced, I notated, social-scientifically, what day it was, what I wore, where I performed, what music I used, who approached me, and how much money I made. I attempted to understand the gap between Harold’s life experiences and my own.

Harold and I spoke every Tuesday, and if not Tuesday, then Saturday. Usually our conversations started like this:

“Hello?”

“Hi Harold. How are you?”

“Why, is this Ms. Anne Marie Rudnik?”

“Yes it is, Harold.”

“It is Tuesday, after all.”

“That’s right.”
“You talk first, because if I start to talk you won’t say anything at all. You did call for a reason, did you not?”

“I called to say, ‘Hi, Harold’ and to see how you are doing.”

“You must have something more to say. Are you wearing your glasses?”

Giggling. “Yes. How’d you know?”

“I just know these things, my dear. I don’t know how I know. I guess I can hear it in your voice.”

“You’re incredible, Harold. How are you doing?”

This is how we kept in touch each week. There is no other person in the world that I have phoned with such regularity and for such a long time than Harold. Even when I traveled to Europe, Harold would find me and call and later complain about that nasty phone bill he amassed. I traveled to see him, too, at least three times per year. And when we lived nearby, I saw him almost weekly.

At the end of my first year in college, after just starting to work personally with Harold, I called my parents. “Mom, Dad,” I spoke with sincere tears forming in my eyes. “I know what I want to do with my life. I am going to be a tap dance historian!”

“Annie, are you crying?” my mom asked.

“Annie, do those even exist?” my dad questioned.

Harold opened me up to a passion I didn’t know was inside of me. In my ten years of tap dance training, no teacher had ever spoken of the dancers that originated tap dance. Do tap dance historians exist? I didn’t really know. But, were they needed? Emphatically, yes.
I arrived in New York City in January 2012 to spend a long weekend visiting and recording with Harold and performing at Secret City. I made sure that Harold was available all weekend long, but I didn’t exactly tell Harold about the performance in full.

We were out to lunch at Theatre Row Diner and I said, “Harold, I was invited to perform in a kind of show. It’s not really a typical show, it’s kind of like church. It’s like church for artists. It doesn’t mention the Bible or God, but instead it thinks about art. ‘We worship art’ is their motto. It’s called Secret City. It happens once a month. Each month, there is a theme and then artists perform or share works with the audience based on that theme. It’s in a really small space on the Lower East Side. They invited me to perform in this church type event. It’s happening this Sunday.” Harold was still eating his catfish and tomatoes. I went on, “So this Sunday, the theme is Wonder and they asked me to perform about you because, Harold, you’re the wonder in my world.” Harold smiled. The line sweet, but cliché. “Um, I am going to perform. I will perform some numbers that you taught me and tell the audience about you. I want you to be there, Harold.” He nodded. “And while I’m performing, if I say something wrong; correct me. If you want to speak out just because; do it. If you want to get up and stand on stage; you are invited. If you want to dance or sing with me; join along. I will perform for and about you and I want you to be there. Will you come? How does it sound?”
“That sounds good, Annie. Oh yeah.”

“I just don’t know what exactly I’m going to perform. I’ll definitely do ‘Nagasaki’ and the ‘Shim Sham Shimmy.’ Do you have any suggestions? Anything you want me to do?”

“Annie, don’t plan it out. Let it come to you.”

“But Harold is there anything you’d really like me to perform? Anything new I should learn?”

“Don’t plot it out. Let it come.”

A few months prior, I was living in New York City. I fell in love and followed a man there. I spent a year working really hard for money, for love, for passion and for play. I worked three jobs while taking care of an unemployed, depressive boyfriend. I was really unhappy, but I couldn’t see the problems from the inside. I had less time for dance and friends and less time to meet with Harold. In the year of living in New York City, I saw Harold maybe ten times total. One afternoon, I made time to meet with him. I went to Harold’s apartment and from there we slowly strolled arm in arm singing songs and reminiscing about Betty Grable. We went to the diner across the street. We sat in his usual booth. Harold had an omelette with tomatoes and a cup of Manhattan clam chowder. I ate a chicken sandwich. When there was a break in conversation, I said, “I’m getting married, Harold.”

“No you’re not.” Harold said. That was it.

I said again, “Really, I’m engaged. We don’t have a date or a ring, and we probably won’t get married for another year or two, but we are engaged. Really.”
Harold didn’t flinch. I thought it was odd, like he didn’t understand my words. He acted as if I just said something crazy like, “Harold, I’m going to balance a hippopotamus on top of my head while standing on a hyena.”

But, of course, Harold was right. I wouldn’t really marry that man.

January 2012 was my first time back in New York after leaving that relationship. He had been my first love and I was left traumatized and haunted. How could I be with someone so wrong for me for so long? I held fears that I would just run into him, because while it is filled with millions of people, New York is still an island. In fact, that man and I had met on a fateful subway ride while I was in town visiting Harold. It was a freak chance occurrence and it could happen again. The day before my departure, I still wasn’t sure I was actually going to go. My self-confidence was in a rather fragile state.

I was also scared to perform. I accepted Chris’s invite, but I hadn’t quite told Harold, or Chris, the whole story.

Chris’ email invited me to perform in any number of situations. I could perform solo or with an ensemble or I could introduce Harold to Secret City in any way I wanted. I was so excited to be invited, I responded, “Yes!” before I even asked Harold outright. I had invited Harold to the show, made sure that he was available to attend, but I hadn’t asked him to dance with me. I felt too shy. The tap dancing I did was often under the guise of “research.” Even though, by that time, I was a regular performer with big bands in night clubs, on the streets, and with dance companies, my mind was clouded by feelings of insignificance and fraud. I thought that Harold thought I was only a writer. I didn’t think that Harold wanted to perform with me. And I really didn’t think that Harold
would want to perform in a non-profit, non-performance, non-church. Harold would
demand payment, but Chris didn’t mention payment and I was too afraid to ask. Even
still, I told Chris that Harold and I would both be there dancing because I didn’t really
think that I had enough to show on my own. I thought I needed the focus to be off of
myself, shadowed by an epic entertainer, in order to put on a good show. But really, this
processing can only be described as thoughts in hindsight. My insides were twisted in
swirl of self-loathing. The things I told to Chris, Harold, my friends, and myself were all
different sides to the same story: I want to perform for the people I love, about and with
the best performer I know, Harold.

Harold was always known as a difficult person to work with. Other tap dancers
often thanked me for the history work I was doing with him saying, “You must have a lot
of patience.” And I did. Harold didn’t trust a soul. Every person he met was suspect for
stealing his material, story, or choreography for their own profit. And if that person
herself wasn’t about to steal from him, surely her lawyer would. He always demanded a
contract, but he never signed the contract. He said, “No Room At All,” to express the
denial he faced throughout his career. But, Harold still talked with me and he trusted me
to be the writer of his book, also called No Room At All.

I also knew that Harold would want to be the star in any show he was to perform.
After all, isn’t he the best entertainer in the room? Yes. And doesn’t he deserve the
starring role? Yes. But this wasn’t that kind of show. It wasn’t really a show at all. What
was I supposed to do, tell him straight out? “I want you to perform with me completely
improvised, a cappella, for no money, at an event that’s not a real show, but more of a
community-type gathering.” I should have. But I didn’t. I knew what I was doing. I was
setting us up to dance together, for Harold to perform, but without, exactly, his permission. But he got the idea. He probably knew it weeks prior when I first invited him there and told him what I wanted to perform. He always knew what I was thinking, even when I didn’t say or even know I was thinking it. It’s like how he always told me, when we were talking over the telephone, whether I was wearing my contacts or glasses. Or how he told me I wasn’t getting married. I don’t know how he did it, but he was always right.

Chris emailed in preparation for the show. He wanted to know what props, sound, and special lights I wanted.

He asked, “How much time do you need?”

I didn’t know how to reply. I had two songs and a couple of stories I could perform; not much. Of course I could always improvise tap dance, but I had no music. I might lose the beat while dancing a capella. If I did all the polished material I had, it would total 5-6 minutes. That’s it. But, on the other hand, I am a street performer. I know how to work a crowd. I have the ability to charm anyone, anywhere. As does Harold. Together, we could charm the audience for at least 25 minutes. After some deliberation, hemming and hawing, I decided 12-15 minutes.

“12-15 minutes,” I wrote. I didn’t know what I was going to perform, so how could I know how much time would I need. But, Chris didn’t know that. He assumed I was ready. The show was, after all, just two days away. 12 to 15 minutes sounded good. Solid. Interesting.

“10 minutes?” Chris replied.
“Sure,” I wrote, “10 minutes is great.” 10 minutes it is. I was relieved.

“And one more thing, do you have a title? How do you want to be written up in the program?” Chris wrote

“We don’t have a title. Maybe, just *A Dance* by Annie Rudnik and Harold Cromer.”

That Sunday I arrived at Harold’s apartment hours before Secret City. I brought him orange juice and coffee, as I did every time we met. He was ready to go when I arrived. Harold was dressed up in his sweater vest, blazer, gold scarf, and captain’s cap. We took the beverages with us, left the apartment, and stood on 10th Ave to hail a taxi. Harold stood back away from the street and had me wave. He always did this. He just knew that a taxi wouldn’t stop for a *jigaboo* like him. *No Room At All!* I always tried to convince him otherwise, but it was no use. He stood back and pretended as if we weren’t together. And when the taxi stopped, Harold shuffled to the car, trying to get in quickly, as if the taxi driver would drive away. Harold never hailed a taxi on his own in New York City. Even if I wasn’t getting in the car, I always secured the taxi for Harold. Other friends confirm doing this, too.

We arrived at Dixon Place an hour and a half before the service. We sat in the cafe area upstairs, away from the stage. We didn’t even glance at the stage, not once. Harold and I sat, sipping orange juice and coffee and not speaking much. It was early for Harold. Bobby, Chris’s partner, stopped and introduced himself on his way to help prep the stage. Harold nodded his head with a half smile. He was tuning himself in to the space and the people of the space. I, on the other hand, was nervous and getting
more nervous as we sat. I asked Harold if I should go soundcheck and make sure the tap board they found is good enough.

Harold said, “You can, if you want,” suggesting slight disapproval. I didn’t. So we sat. We waited. We drank coffee.

I said, “It’s hard not to plan. Your mind just starts putting things in order.”

Harold said, “Annie, just take it as it comes. Say whatever comes to you. Do whatever comes to you.”

My best friend Sarah arrived. “So are you all ready? All set up?” she asked.

“Not sure,” I responded, “I haven’t yet been down to check it out. Harold won’t let me.”

“You’ll never know, until it happens. You’ve just got to do it,” Harold stated.

It was time. We went downstairs to the theater and sat in the front row. Harold scanned over the program while I said hi to some friends. He saw, “A Dance by Annie Rudnik and Harold Cromer.” And then the music started and the show/service began. We looked at the wonderful sparkling art adorning the altar. We heard news from the cultural calendar. We sang songs and mingled. We tasted Pop Rocks for the Wonder-themed food offering. Harold refused to taste them. We breathed together. We sat in silence together. We spoke about the wonders of the world and pondered creativity. And then it was time for a dance.

I took the stage in a purple dress, gray tights, and gold tap shoes. I looked at the audience and said, “I’m here today to tell you about a wonder in the world of
entertainment and a wonder in my life. He touched the stages of Vaudeville, Broadway, Rock ‘n’ Roll, television, and film. And he touched my...”

“Get on with it!” Harold interrupted.

“Well, that’s Harold,” I said.

“Harold ‘Stumpy’ Cromer. He’s, well, wonderful. I met Harold in 2004, when I was a student at Sarah Lawrence College. I just happened to sit behind him at a dance performance at Symphony Space and he could hear me cheering for the dancers. He turned around and said, ‘I could tell you’re a fan.’ ‘And I’m interested in the history, too,’ I told him. ‘You’re talking to the right person,’ he said. And that was it. We started recording his oral histories and I’ve been his biographer ever since. Look for his book, it’s called No Room At All.”

“That’s right. Annie’s my autobiographer. You’re doing good. Now tell it like it is, Annie,” Harold said.

I went on. “Harold taught me this song I’d like to sing for you. It’s by Rhythm Red. Isn’t that right, Harold?”

“Well, yeah. I think so. Sing it. And then I’ll tell ya,” Harold said.

“I’ve got a stack of magazines, about so high,” I began singing, “Can’t read ‘em and you know why. I’ve got to go tap dancing tonight...”
Harold stood up as I finished my song. He joined me onstage, to the right of me. Both of us standing stage right of center. “There comes a time when in everyone’s life when you must be reborn,” Harold began. “Every single person must be reborn.”

I looked into the audience and smiled in shock. Yes, this is like church, but it isn’t church. It certainly isn’t a right-winged church, I thought. I started preparing myself to defend or clarify Harold’s words for him. I wanted to protect us all from potential discomfort or anger.

Harold went on, “When you are born, nobody tells you who you are. They just assume you know yourself. They assume you know who you are when you come into the world. They don’t introduce you to yourself. You see, everyone must be reborn.”

I began to follow.

Harold said, “They don’t even introduce you to your parents. Nobody says, ‘Hi, I’m your mom,’ or ‘Hi, I’m your dad.’ Never. They just assume you know who your parents are. And they assume you know yourself, too. But there comes a time in everyone’s life when you must decide who you are for yourself. Every person must be reborn.”

I was in shock. Harold told me, “Don’t plan. Don’t plan. Just follow what comes out.” But I wasn’t prepared for this statement so off topic.

“Is that right, Harold?”
“That’s right. It’s not quite evangelical, but it is in a way. You know, my mom always told me to lead the angelical life. She was a follower of Father Devine. He was a big preacher, especially in New York City, and Father Devine saved my mother’s life when she was hemorrhaging after birthing her ninth child. That’s right, I was one of nine.” Harold was on a roll. He spoke and I listened. “I was a twin. Boy and Girl. Me, Harold and my sister Hattie. But I didn’t dance with Hattie. I performed with my little sister Evelyn. She liked performing much more. And she was good, too. We would dance at the Apollo Theatre and at the Kit Kat Club in competitions and we would win. The prize was a big bag of groceries, which was really needed back then, because it was in the Great Depression. My mother was so pleased with us, she said, ‘Keep on dancing and bringing home those groceries!’”

The audience lit up to see Harold so animated.

“Well, let’s show you what we can do. I bet you don’t think I can play piano. Well, let me show you.” Harold walked over stage left and kicked the pianist off his bench. The audience laughed. Harold began a jazzy ragtime tune. “I didn’t even know I could play, either! I swear! I don’t even try. It just comes!” Harold shouted over the music.

I stepped up on the tap board center stage. We began to duet, tap dance and piano, all improvised and in the moment. He fed me stop-time and I took the solos. He
sang on top of the piano. Piano, voice, song, and dance, altogether. We ended perfectly in sync. The audience applauded.

Harold stood up from the piano and joined me center stage.

“See, I didn’t even know I could play piano like that! You don’t believe me, but it just came like a miracle!” Harold said.

I sensed that our 10 minutes were about up and it was time to make our exit.

“But, that’s how it is,” Harold went on, “It’s like with my tap dancing. You see, I was never a tap dancer. I first danced on roller skates, when my brothers and I played roller hockey. It was when I was bored because the puck wasn’t coming to me that I started playing around making tap dance sounds on my roller skates.”

“Harold,” I interrupted, “How about we show them that you can still tap dance without tap shoes? Let’s do the Shim Sham Shimmy!”

Everyone looked at Harold’s shoes. Winter boots. No tap shoes.

“Yes, we’ll do the Shim Sham Shimmy, in a bit. But, as I was saying, tap dancing is just dancing. Like Ragtime by that wonderful musician Scott Joplin. It is just as wonderful as classical or jazz. But because Scott Joplin was making it, they called it a rag. ‘Yeah, play that rag,’ they said. Scott Joplin was just as good as Shostakovich. But Scott Joplin’s music, that’s a rag.”
I looked behind myself where Chris was sitting on stage. We saw each other’s gaze and he gave me the signal to wrap it up.

“Harold, how about our grand finale?”

“Yeah, the Shim Sham Shimmy is a dance by Leonard Reed, who was a great light-skinned tap dancer. It’s become the anthem of tap dance, so to speak. Every tap dancer across the world knows the Shim Sham Shimmy and dances it in their own way. Chicagoans do it a little differently than New Yorkers or Chinese. You’ll see even when Annie and I dance the Shim Sham Shimmy, we’ll do it slightly differently. Did you know that I went to China to dance?” Harold went on.

Chris stepped forward to try his hand at closing up our segment. “Stumpy, it is such an --”

“It’s Harold Cromer,” Harold interjected. He felt Chris attempting to kick him off stage.

“Mr. Cromer,” Chris proceeded, “it’s such an honor to have you here at Secret City. Let’s give a round of applause for Harold.” The crowd applauded. “We would love to see the Shim Sham Shimmy, wouldn’t we?”

“Yeah!” the audience cheered.

“Well, you wanted me to dance and now---” Harold cut off his thought and started laughing to himself a bit. “Just like all the other producers. I saw what you did.” He was starting to get indignant. “You even wrote it down,” Harold said, referring to his name in the program. He wasn’t even asked to perform and yet his name was in the program telling the audience that he would dance. “You said, ‘Dance!’ but now---” Harold thought about the countless times he was screwed over. There wasn’t any contract. He wasn’t
getting paid for this. Lord knows someone is making money off all these people here seeing this show. “Like a typical white producer,” Harold said, staring at Chris.

“Ha, ha, ha,” Chris laughed awkwardly, looking past Harold’s gaze and straight to the audience. “I wouldn’t say that,” he smiled.

Harold just kept staring. He was thinking about all the times he was stolen from, denied, and mistreated. He was mistreated in the South when he couldn’t stay at a hotel or eat at a restaurant with his fellow performers on tour. He was denied recognition when the Broadway producers left his name off the playbill in 1938 for his duet with Ethel Merman. He was stolen from by his manager Nat Nazarro, who wouldn’t let Harold see their original contracts with the producers or theaters so he could skim off more cash for himself and pay Harold less. Harold was thinking about the many times he performed the “Olio Spot” in Vaudeville and Broadway, attempting to entertain audiences without the aid of lights or music during the intermission, because he wasn’t even given time during the scripted show. No Room At All! Harold thought while he fumed.

There was a heavy silence over the theater. Chris looked at me, I looked at the audience. I smiled uncomfortably. I looked at Harold. For a moment, we all were still.

“Harold, I think the Shim Sham Shimmy might be a great way to end our show,” I said.

“Let’s show them the Shim Sham Shimmy, with the real accompanying song Nagasaki,” Harold said, returning to performance mode.

“Written by the same composers who wrote 42nd Street.”

“In 1928, by Harry Warren and Mort Dixon.”
We sang, “Hot ginger and dynamite. That’s all they serve at night. Back in Nagasaki where the fellas chew tabbacky and the women wicky wacky woo...” and danced stomp, brush, step; stomp, brush, step; stomp, brush, step; stomp, brush, step; stomp, brush, step, until our grand “shave and a haircut” finale.

The audience rose to their feet and cheered. We bowed, hugged, bowed again, and took our seats.

Our part was over and the service went on. Chris stood at the altar and gave the sermon, a funny story about Chris’s first summer as a professional actor in a summer-stock theater company. We meditated. Guest musician Sxip Shirley broke the meditation with his music. He made sounds with marbles and mixing bowls, handbells and loop pedals, and put his voice through sound machines. It was odd, improvised, alien, and beautiful. And then the show ended.

Harold certainly stole the show. Every person in the audience wanted to say, “Hi,” and thank him for sharing his story and artistry. People were really touched. Audience came up to me as well. They thanked me for bringing Harold. Multiple people said, “It was beautiful. We could see your relationship play out on stage. You have so much patience and you both have so much love.”
Harold was still furious when Chris approached, “Thank you so much for your performance,” he said. “You have an incredible way of captivating an audience. That was really great!” Chris shook Harold’s hand. Harold looked up at Chris, smiled a strained smile, and didn’t say a word.

I was still thinking about that first rant that Harold gave, out of the blue. He said, “There comes a time in everyone’s life when they have to be reborn.” Harold knew what he was saying, even though it was not planned. When he told me not to plan, he was trying to teach me. But what was I doing when I was trying not to plan? I was planning. I couldn’t help it. I was trying to mark out what I knew and how to present it all. But, Harold had a sense that was beyond Earthly. Over the phone, he knew whether I was wearing my glasses or contacts. He told me I wasn’t going to marry my first fiancé.

One time at Theatre Row Diner, I told Harold, “I have travel angels.” I explained that whenever I am on the road, people always show up to help me out. During a tour, in the middle of Texas, my car broke down. Engine was kaput. I was a young woman, traveling alone in a small Texas town. Things could’ve gone wrong. But the nearest mechanic happened to have a tow-truck and happened to be kind. His wife operated the phone and arranged for her husband to pick me up and their son to take me to the nearest hotel to spend the night at a discounted rate. And then another time when I was hiking in the woods and I completely lost my way and I was starting to freak out, I stumbled upon a couple hiking and I asked them for directions. They suggested that I hike with them and they would drive me back to my campsite. I gave them my trust. When we got back to their car, the woman stretched her arms up and I saw tattooed to her hip the phrase, “You’re never so lost that angels can’t find you.”
After I told my stories, Harold stared into my eyes and said, “Only angels can see angels.”

It was as if he were saying, “Annie, you are an angel. We are siblings in a spiritual family.”

Harold was more than human. He lived the angelic life, like he said. He was trying to teach me to do the same.

“There comes a time when we all have to be reborn,” he said.

Later that year, just before Harold started getting really sick, I went on a road-trip to the West Coast. I traveled by car-sharing and hitch-hiking up from San Diego to Seattle. I spoke with Harold every Tuesday.

It was in Seattle where I met a healer named Rae. She was very sought after and people waited weeks to get an appointment. Magically, an appointment opened up in her schedule the day I called and she could see me. She asked, “What can I do for you?” I told her that my spine twisted in towards my left kidney. This made me stand lopsided, taller on my right side than my left. Sometimes it was really bad and I didn’t feel like I had control of my body. I was unwillingly pulled in an awkward configuration. The sensation had come and gone ever since my senior year of college, for about five or six years. It was back full force at that moment. I also told her, “I have an ongoing project, a biography, that I’ve been working on for almost ten years. It’s about a Vaudeville performer, Harold “Stumpy” Cromer. I met him when I was in college and we’ve been recording oral histories ever since. He asked me to write his biography. And
I’ve been working on it, kind of. I just can’t seem to put pen to paper. I feel so much pressure. He’s getting old and I want to get it done.”

My thoughts flashed back to 2007, during my final semester of college. Harold and I were meeting each week that year and making real progress towards documenting his life story. But, I was graduating school and I needed to find some direction. I was offered a position to assist an artist in the Czech Republic. Of course I would love to go, but what about Harold? I thought about our work and our book and I didn’t want to disappoint him. But, this opportunity was once in a lifetime and I would regret it if I didn’t take it. How could I tell him?

On a Tuesday afternoon I mustered up my courage and went over to Harold’s apartment. Throughout the train ride I practiced what I would tell him, “Harold, I need to go back to the Czech Republic, where I will still work on your book, but…”

But when I arrived, Harold talked and I listened. He said, “Annie, you are leaving. I know you are. You need to go back there. I saw it in the pictures. You belong with those people in the mountains. You look just like them. And this book is yours. I know you will write it. I’ve told you enough to keep you going. Whether I am here or not, you will write this book. You need to go and live your life. You will write this book when the time is right.” Harold told me exactly what I had planned to tell him.

Annie and Harold at Annie’s graduation from Sarah Lawrence College, 2007.
Rae grabbed my attention again. She said, “The kidneys are people’s source of power and drive. They are our fire, our furnace, and our will. Your kidneys give you the ability to be self-assured, to stand tall on two feet and to be your own human being. When you’re born, you receive that power from your parents. Your right kidney is your dad; your left kidney is your mom. But at some point you need to take control of your kidneys and find your own source of strength.”

“There comes a time when you need to decide for yourself who you really are,” Harold said. “Everyone needs to be reborn.”

She said, “It seems that somehow your mother and Harold are together holding your left kidney. You need to take power over that place. You need hold your own strength and stand on your own feet. You need to decide for yourself who you are.”

Rae worked on me for two hours. She sang tones. She put crystals on my head and chest. And she tapped parts of my body. I felt vibrations inside of myself in places where she wasn’t touching and felt the vibrations move towards her hands. I am not generally a person that takes on the supernatural, but I could feel Rae working.

After she finished and I was rested and upright, she said, “I found your will. It was trapped in your toddler-age self in a dark closet. It was happy being there. It was safe inside that closet.”

I remembered our famous family story about my mom and me and our differences in taste. I was about four years old and my mom bought me a bright sundress with big pockets on the front. Apparently I didn’t like it, but I didn’t know how to tell her. She would say, “Annie, go upstairs and put on that beautiful new sundress!” and I wouldn’t. The next day she’d tell me again, and I wouldn’t. After several times of me
just refusing her suggestion, I finally went upstairs, took out the sundress, and ripped one of the pockets straight off the dress. I came downstairs and innocently said, “Momma, I can’t wear it. It’s broken.” Perhaps this was the moment that my will went to hide in the closet, I thought.

Rae continued to tell me that she had to negotiate with my will. But she got it out of the closet and back inside me. She took out the energies that didn’t serve me and made sure that I was filled with energies that did. She told me I had a weak throat chakra and that I should practice using my voice more. “Take up singing,” she advised. Just like what Harold always said, I thought. “Be a triple threat. Sing, dance, and act. Do it all.” Harold always encouraged me to sing. Rae finished her notes and lastly she said, “You’re ready for a relationship.”

I walked out of Rae’s studio standing taller and stronger. I felt new. I was reborn.

When I went to visit him a month before he died, Harold turned to me, looked me straight in the eye and said, “You’re getting married.” I hadn’t even brought up my boyfriend Dan. We were in the hospital, for Christ’s sake. I am not thinking about myself right now, I’m trying to keep you alive. Harold didn’t elaborate. He didn’t need to. Just like he had done a couple years prior in the opposite situation. And, he was right, as he always is. We will be married next fall.

Harold died in June 2013. He entertained for over nine decades on stages, streets, and day-to-day. “Life is but a stage,” Harold would say. He touched those around him with his spontaneous wit and deep insights. Known for his captain’s cap,
Harold would declare, “I am the captain of my ship, master of my soul.” Harold tried to teach me to feel that same strength; to take and bring forth the spontaneous magic of life. And I am still trying to learn.

*Photos by Bobby Lucy, Al Podgorski, Annie Rudnik, Carol Rudnik, and unknown.*

Harold Cromer in his captain’s cap, 2005.
“What I’m after isn’t flexible bodies, but flexible brains. What I’m after is to restore each person to their human dignity.”

- Moshe Feldenkrais
Another Elusive Obvious:
The Feldenkrais Method and Dance Training

If you are a trained dancer from a classical ballet and modern dance point of view, you have taken in some dogma, beliefs, or assumptions, as have I. Dance is often taught (if unintentionally) as an exclusive art form. To dance professionally there are many hoops to jump through. It is believed one must not only have the strength, flexibility, rhythm, dedication, discipline, and passion, but also must inherit the right shape and be the right age. For in dance, one cannot get away from oneself.

As a young dancer I took on the assumptions taught in my dance training. In high school I was told by my most beloved ballet teacher that if I really wanted to “make it” I needed to travel to the dance school downtown six days per week, instead of studying at the local studio. She often let all her students know, as she sighed, “You’ll never get anywhere if you stay here.” (By saying this, she was, of course, bad-mouthing her own teaching.) In the ballet summer camp and conferences I attended regularly, nutrition experts gave lectures on body types and diets. Afterward I felt defeated by my muscular and round body shape. The only time a teacher ever gave me real encouragement said it in this way, “Annie, you are good enough to be a professional dancer, I just don’t want your weight to get in your way. You should lose 10-15 pounds.” She gave me diet advice, suggesting remove foods that I had already removed from my high schooler regime. My mom and another parent of another dancer used to argue whether it was better for a three year old girl to begin dance lessons with ballet or tap. My mom argued that ballet is the foundation for all dance while the other mom argued tap gives a child
rhythm which is most necessary. I started my dance training at age three in ballet and age nine in tap (and jazz and modern) and at age thirty, I am still training.

Many of my friends from that dance school no longer dance. There is an all or nothing mentality that goes along with dance training. This aids to the exclusivity that is often assumed. People who dance for fun would never call themselves dancers out loud to others. Anna Paskevska writes on this topic in her book *Getting Started in Ballet: A Parent’s Guide to Dance Education*. She writes, “[Top dance schools] tend to instill an all-or-nothing attitude in their students that precludes an objective assessment of the options open to dancers.”23 Paskevska goes on to describe a student that gave up dancing at age 18 because she did not know there are options for a dancer besides for the major New York City-based companies. Her teachers taught her to strive for no other reality, and she expressed sadness for the dance she could have pursued had she known that other venues exist. Dance, of all childhood activities and art forms, might have the biggest drop off rate. Most girls have a year or two or more of dance training, but leave it when they hit puberty, or go to college, or when they leave behind professional dance pursuits for other careers. And as a mature dancer, who has outlasted many of my friends, I have dealt with questions of quitting more than a handful of times. And I wonder quite often whether or not I fit in the prescribed dancer box well enough to claim myself as that. I think this is a question that plagues most dancers, “Am I a ‘real’ dancer?” My mother-in-law wisely said, “You know you’re a true artist when you fear you’re a fraud.”

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I am not alone in questioning if what I do counts enough to call myself “a dancer.” Social practice dance artist and manager\textsuperscript{24}, Shawn Lent wrote a blog post entitled, “Am I A Dancer Who Gave Up?” on the same topic. Lent is a dance artist currently working in Cairo, Egypt, teaching dance to children with cancer, which she started as a 2012-2013 Fulbright Scholar. In this blog post she recalls a question asked of her during a lecture she gave to dance and theater students at her alma mater Millikin University. When the lecture opened up for questions and answers, one undergraduate asked, “Did you have any sort of breakdown when you gave up your dreams?”\textsuperscript{25} This is a shocking question for anyone in any field to answer, and the fact that it was asked in this way displays the deep set assumptions taught to young dancers. In response, Lent wrote, “I composed myself and explained that I had not given up on my dream; my dream had gotten bigger.” She went on, “I am dancing, with and for others. I am and will always be a dancer. I take that with me in the ways I think, develop ideas, collaborate, move. I haven’t been on a professional or semi-professional stage in six years, but I am a dancer.”\textsuperscript{26}

This article received thousands of views on Lent’s website and then was picked up by the Huffington Post and went viral with over 170,000 views and 27,000 likes. On Lent’s website alone there are over 90 comments, many of which express relief to hear that they are not alone in feeling this way. One commenter Deana wrote, “I think I will stop defining myself as a FORMER dancer, and just call myself a DANCER. Thanks

\textsuperscript{24} Self-titled by Shawn Lent, as stated in her blog post “Am I A Dancer Who Gave Up?”

\textsuperscript{25} Shawn Lent “Am I A Dancer Who Gave Up?”

\textsuperscript{26} Shawn Lent.
Shawn!” Another commenter Kelsi spoke about her dilemma deciding which major to choose in college, she wrote, “The idea of dropping dance as a major has left me with a sense of failure or settling for less than may dream-- until I read this.” The dance community at large needed to hear these words because the assumed image of a successful dance artist is far too narrow to fit most dancers.

Dogmas in dance go beyond the identity of a dancer. In dance training, one learns certain ways in which to breathe, or hold one’s spine, or even walk. Often, at least for a while, one holds on to these rules always, in all parts of life. For instance, a rule might be that one’s spine must always be held long, and the pelvis not tucked nor arched back. These rules about how one must breathe, stretch, and tone themselves are taken as an inherent part of dance training and maintenance. Sure, as one matures she might decide some rules are better for herself than others and she might learn which advice to take and which advice to ignore. But a dancer is rarely without rules, dancers can easily be dogmatic.

The Feldenkrais Method is often tagged as a somatic method. Somatics is an umbrella term for body-centered holistic practices such as Body-Mind Centering, Laban, Alexander Technique, Pilates, Gyrotonics, and others. While each method is quite unique, they share the idea of healing from one’s body out through oneself, finding the body’s own way to heal itself. This point of view is different from western medicine which studies symptoms, makes diagnoses, and prescribes drugs. Somatic methods can be

27 Deana, comment on “Am I A Dancer Who Gave Up?” August 1, 2013.
28 Kelsi, comment on “Am I A Dancer Who Gave Up?” September 26, 2013.
empowering to the individual and promote improvement throughout many aspects of life.

In the 20th Century, modern dance especially began to incorporate ideas from somatics into dance training. Anatomical views on alignment, balance, and effort started seeping into dance jargon. Mabel E. Todd’s book *The Thinking Body*, published in 1937, was one of the first publications to connect anatomy with psychology. This book inspired many of the other somatic methods. Todd made her career as an educator and as a trainer. She gave posture lessons to elite women, many of whom joined the workforce for the first time to help with the war effort. Todd helped these women ease their discomfort in manual labor by balancing their body dynamics. In a clear way, dance is also concerned with posture, alignment, balance, and body dynamics. And so it makes sense that dancers might incorporate the lessons from Todd and others into their own training.29

I was introduced to the Feldenkrais Method under the umbrella term “Somatics” in my university dance training. While in college I experienced a bit of Alexander Technique, Body-Mind Centering, Laban, Eurythmy, and Feldenkrais, but none so much that I could differentiate these modalities. After college, I began working as a personal trainer at the fitness facility in a senior citizen community center. Each of my clients was aged and suffered from some sort of ailment, whether mental, physical, or both. I led each on a personalized regime of strengthening and cardiovascular exercises, but I could feel in myself a disconnect between my dance training and this personal training. Through my 20+ years of dance training, I could sense myself in my bones and in

gravity, that helped me engage my muscles and breathe full breaths so that I could
move with greater ease. It struck me that I did not know how to pass on this information
to my clients. I didn’t have the language to express my years of training in a way that
might help them sense themselves more fully. And so I started looking towards somatic
methods in order to help my clients.

In the first two years of the four year Feldenkrais training program, I all but quit
dance. Feldenkrais approaches the body far differently than any dance training I have
experienced. My Feldenkrais instructor advised us not to stretch, or at least to notice
each time you wish to yank on your body and to notice whether you do it out of
compulsion or a real felt need. After the first session of Feldenkrais training, I would go
in to the studio and feel completely confused by what to do. I no longer felt comfortable
with the dance training routine I practiced of stretching and strengthening, barre work
and centre work, because it did not seem in sync with the instruction from Feldenkrais.
And so I wavered. One day I would spend my studio time doing a Feldenkrais
Awareness Through Movement lesson and the next day I would practice ballet. I began
to feel wary of over strengthening or over stretching and skeptical of the methods I had
been practicing throughout my dance training.

I have spoken to several dancer/Feldenkrais practitioners like myself who have
felt similar, many of whom began studying Feldenkrais after an injury threatened to cut
short their dance career. Feldenkrais works well for injury prevention and pain relief.
This is one clear reason for dancers to be interested in this method. But what are other
ways that Feldenkrais and dance can work together? It seems so obvious on the one
hand, but confounding on the other.
In the six years since my first confounding session of the Feldenkrais training, I have tried integrating dance and Feldenkrais in a number of ways. Recently, though, I made an enlightening observation: Feldenkrais and dance are not the same thing. Feldenkrais and dance do not have the same goals, do not serve the same purpose, and are, in fact, quite different from one another. The one thing that dance and Feldenkrais do share is the body. And in our culture, in which the highest of intellectual achievements is symbolized by an academic gown that all but masks the fact of the body like floating heads, one can see why we might group together all things that have to do with the body. So little of science, medicine, philosophy, sociology, neurology, and others have been dedicated to the study of the body. The body has all but been ignored in many of scientific achievements. “I think, therefore I am,”\(^{30}\) has won the crown in our culture. And so, as a people we know so little about physicality, that we primitively link together all physical practices as if they achieve the same thing.

This statement that dance and Feldenkrais are not the same has had a profound impact on my creative and professional practices. While the goals for dance may vary between dancers and instructors, generally dance is an art form of the moving body by view of an audience. In dance training, one learns forms or techniques that may be called upon from a choreographer who wishes a certain aesthetic on the work. A dancer trains to be both precise and adaptable to execute the demands of any choreographer. A dancer learns a hierarchy of respect, learning to take feedback and corrections from the instructor or choreographer, and make the necessary adjustments. In Feldenkrais, though, one learns of oneself. The movement sequences taught in a Feldenkrais lesson

\(^{30}\) This being an interpretation of Decartes in a way it has been understood. This is not my interpretation of Decartes.
are not for the memorization or perfection of certain sequences, but instead are frames from which to study oneself. Unless a student is completely confused by the instructions, a Feldenkrais teacher will not correct her students, for the movement is far less important than the awareness of oneself. How do I act when I perform this action? What feels difficult, nice, frustrating, or easy? What else moves involuntarily? These are all questions asked to a Feldenkrais student in an Awareness Through Movement lesson. At the heart of the Feldenkrais Method is the study of spontaneity and compulsion. By studying Feldenkrais one becomes more aware of habits or compulsions previously unnoticed. Once these compulsions are revealed, one can choose to live more adaptably or spontaneously through life. Moshe Feldenkrais believed that all ways in which one interacts with the world (thinking, feeling, sensing, and moving) are connected; he called this an “integration.” He chose to use movement to improve the quality of all interactions with the world because he believed that movement is the only part of the integration that could be studied. While in dance, one generally works to have precise movements and to adapt to the needs of the choreographer, in Feldenkrais, one learns about oneself in order to live out one’s own desires. While Feldenkrais might help a dancer, the intentions of the two practices are often conflicting.

In the college course I teach, Feldenkrais for Dancers, I have to face this paradox. My students choose to take this course because they hear it will be good for them, it will help their injuries, they are curious about somatics and movement therapy, or they hope that it’ll be relaxing. While Feldenkrais is beneficial for all of these things, it is my challenge to demonstrate that the goal or purpose of Feldenkrais is none of these
things mentioned. It is quite different than my students might assume. First of all, I teach this course in a college dance department for which I must grade my students. My students know that they are being graded and wish to prove they are working hard at my course, but every day in my Feldenkrais class, like every other Feldenkrais teacher, I instruct my students to do less. I instruct them to have less ambition to do the movement well. In fact, I tell them they can simply imagine the movement and receive even greater benefit. Or if their need and desire is to fall asleep, then taking the risk to sleep during an entire class period might be the lesson they need for the day. And so doing something well in the Feldenkrais perspective is quite different from all other educational models in our culture. I said to my students at the middle of the semester, “If you do anything in this course that is not for yourself, you will damage yourself. If you work against your will, you are hurting yourself. This is a difficult concept because you trick yourself.[…] You have to deal with this paradox. This is maturation.”

One can hold the training of dance and Feldenkrais at the same time. In fact, they are beneficial, but not in the way I once assumed. Feldenkrais helps me to become a better dancer because it helps me break away from my assumed dogma of dance. Instead of adding to the hoops I must jump through in order to call myself a dancer,

31 Author’s notes 3/7/15
Feldenkrais helped me realize the fallacy of those hoops. Through my work in Feldenkrais I can see more clearly that I need not be concerned by my age or body-type or physical strength, especially because it is not at the center of my creative expression. In fact, I now understand that my limited image of a dancer limited myself in my creativity and freedom to dance. Feldenkrais helps me to see my own desire and work towards that goal, instead of sizing myself up to expectations outside of myself. I am able to carry out my curiosity and desires with greater freedom and less judgement, making me a more creative and capable dancer.

I hope to pass this on to my dance students. Through the work of Feldenkrais I hope to give them the ability to slough off unhelpful assumptions that they consciously or subconsciously hold in their self-image. I hope to help them sense more precisely what they are curious about and support the courageous act of moving towards their curiosity. For many might discover the field of dance is far greater than they once perceived and even they themselves are much greater as well.
“Movement is life. Life is a process. Improve the quality of the process and you improve the quality of life itself.”

-Moshe Feldenkrais
Meditations on Oscillations

I stand with two feet on the floor in stillness, except I am never quite still. Yes, I am standing on quiet and solid ground. There is no movement I perceive from outside of myself. Yet, I feel myself shift. I did not decide to shift, no thought recorded told me to move. My weight goes from the front of my left heel to the base of my right little toe to balanced in between my feet for a moment. The movement is constant and irregular. When I close my eyes and the play increases, I move more frequently in a greater range. I shift, fall, catch, rebound, all while staying in one place. Inside I feel a roller coaster of sensation with unexpected grabbing, clenching, and releasing, but from the outside I look like I am just standing still. My body is never still, it is in a constant state of uncertainty, an oscillation.

In 1979 Alvin Lucier placed a 80 foot metal wire stretched between two tables in the rotunda of the U.S. Custom House in New York City. Contact microphones were attached to wooden bridges that suspended the wire. On one side of the wire hung an oscillator and on the other, a horseshoe magnet. The interactions of the movements from the oscillator and the magnet made the wire vibrate in various, unpredictable ways. The vibrations from the wire bounced off the
surfaces in the room and back to the wire, which interacted again with the movements of the oscillator and magnet, causing the wire to change timbre, volume, and rhythmic patterning. Microphones amplified the resulting sound through speakers. This installation music piece is entitled “Music on a Long Thin Wire.”

Imagine a child playing with a rope. She lifts up one end of the rope and with some vigor greater than gravity slams the rope back towards the ground. The rope ripples. Her friend grabs the other end of the rope and they both, in their own timing, lift the rope and slam it back down. The rope goes wild. Vigorous waves from opposite ends of the rope collide in to one another. Meanwhile a third friend tries to jump the rope. She can’t predict when the rope will be at its lowest point because of the irregularity of her friends’ oscillations. She stumbles, the rope stops, she gets up, and they all resume. Imagine their laughter, the vibrations of giggles, jumping and tripping over the movement of the rope and the excitement all around. In the rotunda people gather to see the an 80 foot wire stretched wall to wall dividing the space and to hear the sound of it, the audible manifestation of the wire playing itself, by way of the vibrations from the oscillator, magnet, and location. That same year, Lucier installed this piece in a mall in New Mexico. Shoppers heard live sounds of the vibrations in the space instead of the musak they usually ignored. A local radio station broadcasted the sound of this oscillating wire for five full days and nights. The oscillating air, vibrations of sound, broadcast out over the airwaves reached people as they drove to work, cooked dinner, brushed their teeth, and went on their routine.

32 Cox and Warner, Audio Culture, 207.
One morning in 1986 under the communist regime in Prague, Ivan Kafka planted ten thousand white wooden dowels into the cobblestone road. In each corner of the cobblestone stood another stick. The dowels stretched up from the ground like a field of young wheat. Ivan Kafka sat under the sun and meditated as he planted stick after stick after stick. Less than a mile from the castle and yards from the Charles Bridge, a field engulfed this stretch of narrow road. The scene suspended the normal bustle of life. Cars stopped. Pedestrians rerouted. Police on horseback did not cross this field. No one could pass. They watched. People looked at the police and back at the field. Their minds struck with bewilderment. Free expression was not allowed. At this time only the forest was safe for gathering and conversation. The forest was too vast to be tapped and controlled. In the city, routine was in place. On this day, routine rerouted and new choices made.34

When I lived in the Czech Republic, I walked daily past a medieval church with dirty stone sculptures, down a lane of cherry trees drooping heavily with plump sweet cherries that I ate as I walked to a single narrow path through a field of wild oats. At the top of the oat plants were thick tassels and I held out my hands to tickle my fingertips against their bristles. Over the river and through the forest I walked, picking up wild blueberries and strawberries smaller than my fingernail. Out of the forest, I took the road

past the fishing pond to the farm where I worked. A turbine connected to the stream that fed the pond, powered the farm. The rotation of the turbine produced low whooshing sound. This was the pulse of the work on the farm. Every fall the pond was slowly drained to force the carp pool together into the deepest waters. The fishermen came one October morning. They cast their wide net and slapped the water creating turbulence. The fish jumped out of the water and into the net. These fish would become Christmas dinner.

As the day went on in Prague, the white sticks of Ivan Kafka’s installation collapsed. The wind blew them and the little white dowels fell over. The road was revealed and the passersby began to pass, the routine of the day reinstated.

Think of an object that oscillates: a washing machine, a speaker, a field in the wind, the ocean. Try to remember every time in your life you have witnessed that oscillating object. It’s probably in the background of places and interactions you remember.

In 2007, Goat Island Performance Group presented their final work *The Lastmaker*. It premiered in Zagreb, Croatia. The creation of this piece began with an imagined research trip to the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey. This building originally served as a Byzantine church, then as a mosque and minarets were added, and now it houses a secular museum. This building radically transformed in its purpose and values while its architecture remained pretty much the same caught Goat Island’s imagination. In Zagreb, Goat Island visited a building of a similar history. The Meštrović Pavilion was first built as an art gallery then turned into a mosque, minarets were added, and finally it

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serves again as an art gallery but still known colloquially as *džamija*, Croatian for mosque. In *The Lastmaker* Goat Island performers dance a 20 minute routine based on the mathematical equation of the dome in the *džamija*. They danced to the sound of the metronome, a single steady pulse, in sequences that slowly transformed the feeling of the theater. Like the ocean against stone, they eroded the audience’s expectations for drama and comedy, like a meditation, they slowed down the audience’s heartbeats so they could witness the movement of time together.

A dance like the ocean. The ebb and flow of passing time. I stand still and yet I shift from my right big toe to the front of my left heel. The vibrations bounce off walls and bodies, laughter upon laughter, upon the low whooshing of the turbine. The police horse stops at the sight of the field in the city. The sticks fall down and life resumes. Whether sitting, standing, or lying down, motion is always in action. I breathe in and my diaphragm pushes into my bowels, oxygen travels through my blood to my cells, carbon dioxide releases out my nose and the cycle continues. The Earth rotates around itself and around the sun, and water evaporates and rains down. On Earth, there is always movement in play without a certain end or a conclusion.
Appendix

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Hi, I’m Annie. Tonight I want to start my piece by letting you in on a bit of my process. I’ve been thinking a lot about oscillations. An oscillation is something that moves back and forth and stays pretty much in the same place. I’ve been thinking about things that oscillate, like a fan or pendulum, how bodies oscillate when moving or standing still, how thoughts and emotions can oscillate, and even ourselves, how we oscillate as we change and grow and are still ourselves.

So now I’m going to get you involved. Start to think about some things that oscillate. Narrow in on one object and try to remember every time in your life you have ever witnessed that object. So you don’t feel self-conscious, you may want to close your eyes. I will do the same. You will know to open your eyes when you hear the music playing.

As you probably guessed, that was Beyonce as sung by Annie Rudnik. I recorded that song in the summer of 2007. That was the summer of oscillations. It was the summer after I graduated from college and it was the first time I was without a schedule. Sure, I had school or was on my parents’ timetable and I had free hours, days, or weeks to plan, but suddenly I had a lifetime and I was directionless. And so I oscillated. I spent hours moving the pile of books from that side of my room to the other only to decide, naw it’s better over there. I couldn’t decide what to eat for dinner or what time to fall asleep. That summer I recorded songs like that Beyonce track. Everyone knows about my terrible singing voice. In fact in third grade I was given a lead role in the summer musical, only to be told to lip sync during the grand ballad, When You Wish Upon a Star. And so I spent my time that summer sitting in my room with the lyrics in front of me, the song playing through headphones and my little recorder recorded my voice. My voice oscillates.

There is one thing that has never oscillated. In second grade, in Mrs. Harris’s ballet class, she gave us vocabulary. One day, written up on the chalkboard was the word choreographer. I penned it into my notebook. And when she told us the definition, I
thought, “Oh that’s me.” It was clear. A choreographer, the person who makes the
dances, that’s me.

In 2003, in my senior year of high school, a select group of students were invited
to spend the last month of class to do a project in the “real world.” While some of my
peers interned at the police station or the doctor’s office, I choreographed. I had a
dance that had been brewing for years in my mind. It was a dance with six performers to
my favorite musician, Ani DiFranco. One thing, I only knew of one dancer who could
perform this piece and that dancer was, me. And so I decided to make it a video project,
six Annies dancing together. Slanted to the 6th, a video choreographed, performed, and
directed by Annie Rudnik.

Later that year, in my first semester of college, I discovered that I didn’t know all
there was to know about dance. In fact, I began to think everyone knew more than me.
That year I stopped choreographing completely.

So this video Slanted to the 6th, created in May 2003, was the final piece I
choreographed with small town confidence. But there’s one thing, it’s incomplete.
Somehow during the editing process I lost the footage for one of the dancers. This
dance for six Annie’s only has 5.

But not any more, folks. Tonight I’m going to make it up to you all. I am going to
finish what I started. Tonight I am the sixth dancer. Without further ado, I give to you, the
Completed version of Slanted to the 6th.
Artist Statement

Performance is inherently social. Engagement is engaging.

I am a dance artist working with bodies, histories, and place to create dances that support moments of liveness. I hold assumptions that performance is inherently social and engagement is engaging. I work to engage performers, audience, and setting in a moment of unity. I use comedy, sincerity, and somatic awareness to create dances that listen before they speak. I hold time with breath, eye contact, and embodied energy. “What supports this moment?” I ask. In response, I seek agreement.

The physical body unites our spiritual and social selves. It is our connection to nature. Our muscles and bones are shaped to deal precisely with life on Earth. Yet, in today’s culture bodies are often forgotten and abused. That is, until they break down or cause pain.

When we dance, we engage fully with our environment and nature, ourselves spiritually and socially. We experience the momentum of gravity, time and space. Our breath connects with the coordination of muscles. We find agreement and sometimes unison. Knowledge is held in my body. I dance to synthesize, organize, and empathize. I engage a moment, an audience, and myself as I perform. With a generous heart and curious spirit I lead others to notice and embody this instant in time.
Artist Timeline

March 8, 1985  Born
November 1985  Began to walk
1988  Started ballet class
1992  Learned the word “choreographer”
Summer, 1993  Was told to lip sync the final ballad for summer musical
1993  Joined Imagez Dance Company
1996  Choreographed dance for the spring recital
2000  Began Orchesis Dance Company of GBS High School
2002  Began skipping everywhere
Summer, 2002  Danced at Links Hall, Chicago
2003  Created “Slanted to the 6th” a video choreographed, performed, and edited by Annie Rudnik
2003  First year at Sarah Lawrence College
April, 2004  Attended first tap jam
2004  Started recording oral histories with Harold “Stumpy” Cromer
May, 2004  Began street performing in Chicago
Summer, 2005  Interned at Redmoon Theatre
Summer, 2005  Started performing weekly at the Maxwell Street Market
Fall, 2005  Studied in the Czech Republic
Spring, 2006  Attended School of the Art Institute of Chicago, studied performance art
Summer, 2006  Returned to the Czech Republic to work on an art farm with a summer fellowship
Fall, 2006  Performed in 24-hour performance festival in Boston
May, 2007  Graduated from Sarah Lawrence College
Summer, 2007  Studied in the Goat Island Summer School
Summer, 2007  Sang and recorded many pop songs a cappella
August, 2007 Returned to the Czech Republic to work on an art farm, indefinitely
April, 2008  Started as a personal trainer for senior citizens in Chicago
August, 2008  Began performing with RTG Dance Company in Chicago
May, 2009  Decided to “quit everything” in order to tap dance street perform
Summer, 2009  Began performing as “Hot Foot Annie and the Vaudeville Tramp” with Omen Sade
August, 2009  Began tap dancing at the Green Mill Lounge with a big band
October, 2009  Began Feldenkrais practitioner training
November, 2009  Took a month-long tap dance tour to the American Southeast
September, 2010  Moved to New York City
April, 2011  Started lighting and technical directing theater and dance
October, 2011  Moved back to Chicago
January, 2012  Performed at Secret City with Harold “Stumpy” Cromer
June, 2012  Received artistic residency from Links Hall
October, 2012  Received grant fellowship from Puffin Foundation
April, 2013  Completed intergenerational dance work *We Hope, Conspire*
June, 2013  Graduated from Feldenkrais training
August, 2013  Began Smith College MFA in Dance
February, 2015  Completed thesis performance *Oscillations*
Bibliography


