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Dear Dance, I think we need to break up...

A guide to being a dance major when you don't want to dance anymore

by Anna Olson

I think I asked my friend Claire at least twenty times in ten minutes if she thought I was making a mistake. Would I regret this? What if I gained weight? Would I never be able to do ballet again? It was all irrational and Claire calmly told me so over and over again. Finally, I pressed "Drop Class," and ballet was officially removed from my daily schedule. I had no idea when the next ballet class I took would be.

"How do you feel," Claire asked.

"Terrified."

She laughed and told me to "give it a minute," that the relief would come.

This wasn't the first time, as a dance major, I thought I might not want to be a dancer. I'm not entirely sure when that moment was. It might have been when I got my first B in ballet, when I cried for hours, not understanding why, if I had worked so hard, I didn't get an A. Maybe it was the pain in my knee during jazz class that brought tears to my eyes, or the moment I stood in front of a cast list and didn't even feel upset upon not finding my name, just kind of...empty. It would be easy to blame it on not being able to breathe because my back had gotten tired of holding up arabesques over and over again, or it could be the hours spent lying on top of a bag of ice in the hopes that the inflammation would magically go away.

Sometimes when people ask me why I stopped wanting to be a dancer I offer one of those excuses. Blaming it on one of those things is still easier than explaining the truth.

I didn't love dance.

Even at the peak of my dance career I would jokingly describe dance and me as a toxic relationship—it was never kind to me but I kept coming back for more. I wanted dance's approval, I wanted dance to love me like I loved it. But it never did. Even when dance gave me attention, it was never enough. I hadn't wanted to be in a relationship with dance at all in the beginning, but everyone was so impressed and proud that I was with dance that I kept going and told myself I loved it.

Years later my body was broken down and I was tired. To be fair, so was everyone else, so I couldn't figure out why working hard and pushing myself to keep going was so difficult for me when others who were just as injured and just as exhausted seemed to be doing just fine. *They* were still in love. I told myself it was burn-out; I just needed space, a break maybe. I took months off. Dance and I didn't talk. I gave myself space and sometimes I thought of dance—it was still beautiful and all, but it wasn't the same. The spark was gone. This romance that had been my whole life was over. Where do you go from there?

They say that when you lose a loved one you experience seven stages of grief. I swear a few years ago it was five, but apparently they just had to make the grieving process longer.

Stage 1. Denial. It was just a bad audition (day, class, month, insert excuse). If I just keep working, sweating, bleeding, crying, it'll get better tomorrow. This lasted for years.

Stage 2. Pain and guilt. The pain had always been there—it was the ache in my left ankle that I resented. It was the embarrassment of being called stupid for not being physically able to do something that echoed in my dreams. Or every single time I looked in the mirror and didn't like what I saw, not because I wasn't healthy or thin or beautiful, but because I had been trained to look at beautiful things and find their flaws and then to remind myself that it would never be enough.

The guilt came later. The guilt came holding hands with fear. What if my parents had wasted all their money on me for no reason? What if I had put my body through all of this for nothing? I had risked so much to get here, and I was about to fail, and it was all my fault. Moving on.

Stage 3. Anger. **Why wasn't I good enough?! Why didn't dance love me?!** There aren't answers for these questions, but also maybe that's for the best.

Stage 4. Depression. No one likes talking about the dark times they went through to get to where they are so I'll make this short. Have you ever been locked out of your own life? And you're just sitting on the stoop watching everyone else do what you wish you could be doing? And you wish you could join them because it looks like so much damn fun, except you're pretty sure you dropped the key to get in somewhere a while ago and you think you might know the way home on some days, except it turns out you were holding the map upside down the whole time? That's what this felt like. I wish I had known that there was a back door to the house, and it had been unlocked the whole time...

Stage 5. The Upward turn. I'm assisting my friend Jake on a show that he's designed the lighting for. I'm programming lighting cues and every time he constructs a new world with the keystrokes that I put into the computer I stare at the empty stage in awe. Two weeks later the show is over; Jake and I finish up the last part of the project, and I say that working with lighting and design is the most alive I've felt in months and that I'm sad it's over.

“Would you like to do more of this kind of thing?” he says.

I stop dead in my tracks and look at Jake, completely thrown off and not quite believing that something I love might love me back.

“Is that an option?” I ask.

Jake laughs “Of course it is, let me send some emails.”

Stage 6. Reconstruction and working through. Several emails later, I have a job, mentors, classes working on projects that make me feel passionate and doing things that I'm actually good at. I talk about lighting design the way someone would talk about a new crush—nervous, a little lost, but with so much hope and love in their voice.

Dance still texts me sometimes at 2 a.m., begging me to come back, telling me it misses me. I calmly remind myself that I don't need dance to be happy. That loving something that doesn't love you back isn't healthy. The more time passes the more I slowly untangle the strings dance had wrapped me up in. I breathe easier without a leotard on. I realize that I prefer it when people compliment my work and they aren't complimenting my body.

Stage 7. Acceptance and hope. "Actually I want to be a lighting designer." I explain this for the millionth time to whoever has just asked me what I want to do when I graduate with my dance degree. This statement is normally followed by a confused look. Sometimes on the days that I'm not tired from working all night on lighting plots or hanging lights or sitting in production meetings, I take the time to explain.

No, I don't want to dance professionally anymore. That doesn't mean my major and degree aren't of any value. It doesn't mean that the years I've spent working to master dance aren't useful. I feel grateful that my new mentors and instructors have taken my background and identity as a dancer and taught me how to see it in a new way. They've taught me to see the value in my story. They've taught me to love and respect dance for the time we've spent together and the lessons I learned. They taught me to accept where I came from and look forward to where I'm going. They taught me how to say goodbye.

I chose not to switch majors. I chose to stay with dance a little longer, and maybe part of it was sentimental, but more so it was acknowledging all of the different ways in which dance has led me to where I am today and why dance makes me a great lighting designer.

I work harder, I see more, I pay more attention, I feel more, I am more, because dance will always be a part of me. No one can take that from me—even after the goodbye.



Anna Olson will receive her dance degree from University of California, Irvine, in the fall of 2020. She plans on working as a freelance lighting designer and hopes to eventually pursue an MFA in lighting design. Photo: Emily Seabourne

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