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Tiler Peck can teach you more than ballet technique

Watching star principal dancers on Instagram, you can learn about dégagés, sure, but also about self-compassion, acceptance, and how to grow into an artist.

by Brittany N. Woo

“That would crush me,” I replied to a friend who had just asked if I followed a high-profile ballet dancer on social media. I laughed it off, but a pang of insecurity instantly hit my stomach. No way could I handle comparing myself to a principal ballet dancer — “too hard on my self-esteem,” I reasoned.

I wanted to feel confident and secure, but I never quite figured out how to do that in the world of professional ballet. Starting as a child, I was drawn to ballet’s impossible goal of technical and artistic perfection. I knew perfection was unrealistic, but it gave me the motivation to continue ballet for years, always working towards achieving the perfect *développé*.

Even when I got my first job with a ballet company, every day was a continuous battle with myself as I tried to find the balance between healthy-competition and total annihilation of my self-esteem. I was almost paralyzed by the fear of failure. I no longer cared about achieving goals, but I was instead focused on appearing perfect. My falls and mistakes led to breakdowns and self-doubt. My hard work was driven by fear of failure rather than reaching for my goals.

Although I couldn’t have named it, I had developed what Carol S. Dweck calls a “fixed mindset.” A person with a fixed mindset believes their abilities and intelligence are static; they see effort as sign that they lack talent, whereas effort is

really about taking steps along the path of growth and expansion. My technical abilities as a dancer became stagnant because of my fear. I projected my desire to be perfect in any way I could.

My social media profile, for example, looked more like my ballet highlights reel than an accurate reflection of my life. I exemplified a fixed mindset by trying to *appear* successful rather than working to actually *be* successful. I tried to cover my insecurity by using social media to project that I lived a perfect life and was living out my ballet dreams dancing professionally.

I stayed in this fixed mindset for a few years, attempting to conceal my effort in order to appear “naturally” smart and talented. To me, the dancers I idolized were perfect and the epitome of success in ballet. I spent hours looking in the mirror, using my reflection as a tool that only ended up fostering self-hatred. My followers saw ballet photos with light-hearted captions, but the 20-plus outtakes and the multiple layered filters were my little secret; I was trying to appear perfect with the smallest amount of risk possible. I did not know how to be vulnerable—being vulnerable was too risky, and I avoided it at all costs.

During the spike of the Coronavirus, I found myself looking for ways to stay in shape while staying inside my home. I tuned in to an Instagram live-streamed

class taught by Tiler Peck, a principal dancer with New York City Ballet. I thought it would be a convenient way to get some exercise, but Peck taught me more than just a few barre combinations during that class. As I watched her demonstrate the combinations, I found myself in awe of her technical skill and confidence. With less than ideal ballet class conditions and using tile floors and a countertop for a barre, Peck revealed what Brené Brown calls “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” in front of a multitude of people.

Live-streaming from the kitchen of her parents’ home, Peck was able to teach challenging combinations but also laugh off her own silly mistakes and difficulties. Despite the slippery tile floors and the music sometimes ending earlier than her combination, she remained confident and self-assured. She was the image I was trying to project on my social media all throughout my professional career: the image of success. Her ability to be vulnerable seemed to help her cultivate self-acceptance and self-compassion. I realized that I do not have to be perfect on social media to be viewed as successful. Showing vulnerability via social media does not mean that I lack inherent talent. As Brown says, vulnerability can be a source of empathy and authenticity.

I have been told that social media is detrimental to self-esteem and that it increases the need for others’ approval. That was definitely accurate in terms of my experience. My fixed mindset was reinforced through social media; I needed others’ approval and validation of my talent and intelligence to feel like I was worthy of acceptance and love. Via Instagram-Live, Tiler Peck taught me some barre combinations, and she also taught me that social media can be used to show self-

acceptance—that no one is really perfect.

Dweck’s idea of a fixed mindset has a counter mindset: the “growth mindset.” People with a growth mindset acknowledge and embrace weaknesses as areas for growth, believe intelligence is ever improving, and welcome challenges as opportunities to learn. In this way, social media can be used as a tool to cultivate a growth mindset. I was used to seeing Peck in full stage makeup and a beautiful tutu. Now, here she was live-streamed from her kitchen in leggings and minimal makeup, laughing off Instagram’s technical difficulties.

Watching Peck use her kitchen counter as a barre just like me suddenly made me realize that ballet class is for learning not for projecting perfection. I previously viewed Peck as someone who was effortlessly flawless, but taking her class showed me that she is not perfect but rather that she is continuously learning, just like me. Although hundreds of miles apart, I was taking class with Tiler Peck! She was coaching me to improve my *dégagés* and my confidence. She demonstrated that it is okay to struggle in front of people; that is what helps you learn, improve, and evolve.

As a dancer, there will be ups and downs, but I have learned that my social media profile does not have to only showcase the peaks. When I struggle, it is a chance to learn and grow. Now, my social media profile is a feed of my real life as an artist. I do not need to have 20 outtakes to get the perfect shot to post, and I am using that extra time I got back to take more at-home ballet classes without worrying about being “perfect.” My social media profile is not perfect, and that is okay.

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