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The paper dance

What is it like living in a world where a piece of paper is in control of your status and emotions? Does passion or paper control your life? Remember the time you received a traffic violation in the mail? It is no longer just a piece of paper, huh...

by Radhanath Thialan

Argh...I was stuck trying to figure out what to write for an assignment in my *Critical Issues in Dance* class! Writing is never my strong suit—that's why I usually speak via movement. What has dance taught me? What do I want to say? As dancers at university, we have so many papers to write, articles to read, journals to... Wait, don't you see the common denominator here? Papers to write on, articles are printed on papers...so are books and degrees! Paper – that's my topic. (This is my choreographic thought process I learned from dance...trying to make sense out of randomness, relating it to life.)

I can't believe that I will be writing a two-page paper about paper! Let's hope that it will not be "tear-rible".

We shouldn't look down on a piece of paper. As a human being in the social system, our lives rely so much on paper. At times, we panic when we lose certain papers, or when it's not there when you need it most... for instance, when you're on the toilet.

On the day we were born, we were introduced to our very first piece of paper – the birth certificate. Throughout the rest of our lives, we constantly work to earn papers that quantify our achievements. Is the paper more important than the experience we get out of it? After a ballet, or a piano exam, we are awarded with a certificate that barely means anything (because we are the proof in the art itself). However, parents willingly pay with paper for their kids to earn a piece of paper. Isn't that interesting to see how the barter system evolved?

When we graduate, we are awarded a diploma. When we travel, our passport has the power to bring us places. Other than some countries paying with polymer, it's mostly paper currencies. When it's payday, that check we receive has the ability to increase the amount in our bank account. Is there anything paper can't do? When we die, we are even given a death certificate that we will never see.

Some people care so much about paper, their goal in life is to get as many papers as they can for credentials and wealth. Is the meaning of life to collect all these papers? The United States Declaration of Independence does not state that all men are created with the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of paper.

As the greed for paper grows, the importance of passion diminishes. However, dance changed that perspective for me. Passion comes first, then the papers will follow.

It is hypocritical when society wants change and has campaigns to cut down less trees. But we grow trees, just so that we can cut them down to make paper. Then we write "Save Our Planet! Stop Cutting Down Trees!" on it. I now wonder what life would be without paper.

Essentially, we are who the papers say we are. Our identities and lives can be summarized by the documents we are granted and have earned. There's a common question that goes, "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a sound?" If there were no more papers to back up our existence, would we cease to exist?

Sometimes I do wonder who I am without those papers? Without them, I would not be here in the United States, pursuing dance as a Malaysian international student at the University of California, Irvine.

Despite how scary paper can be, we are able to learn so much from papers. Without history being written and preserved, we are not able to learn from the past and help better the future, to not repeat the failures of the past. Can dance temporarily help us escape the labeling papers that

identify us? In an economical society, are we continuously doing everything for paper, or are we really passion driven?

You will never look at papers the same way again. Be yourself, be proud, and be bold. Don't let the papers label you fully. Don't let that parking violation you got in the mail ruin your whole day.

Rad Thialan is a second-year Dance MFA student at University of California, Irvine, exploring for his thesis the way dance in his native Malaysia can be part of his explorations as a contemporary choreographer. This essay was performed in class (see photo) by his walking along a paper path towards a shredder, which eventually consumed the paper and its messages of "Who are you without paper?" and sketches of official documents.