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My Able Body

Why chronic illness has kept me dancing

by Madeleine Schreifels

Dancing and chronic illness seem like an unlikely pair, but I am convinced dancing is very good for people with chronic illnesses. Studies in nursing have shown that dancing can boost the mood and outlook on life of those with chronic conditions. There are even professional dancers, like Sarah Walborn of Washington Ballet, who have made a successful career in dance with a chronic illness. Sarah's career almost ended when she lost too much weight and muscle due to her Crohn's disease, an aggressive autoimmune disorder that causes inflammation of the digestive tract. The company took away her roles. After a year of healing and support of her family, she fought her way back onstage and continues to live out her dreams. I'm going to tell you the story of why my own chronic illness has kept me dancing.

In January of 2016, I woke up in a hospital recovery room, having just received my first colonoscopy. When I snapped out of the haze of the anesthesia, the doctor told me I had Pancolitis — a very severe form of Ulcerative Colitis. The disease is an autoimmune disorder in which my antibodies attack the tissue of my entire colon, causing bleeding ulcers, unbearable pain, and of course many trips to the bathroom every day. He told me he didn't know for sure how they would treat me, but the disease was incurable. All he had to say was that he would start by sending some pills to a pharmacy, but for now, to just go home. Before I could say anything, he said, "Go home with your family. You can't be at school right now. You're in no condition to be there. I'll call you in a few days."

I didn't panic until I'd slept off the anesthesia and realized I had already missed rehearsals and my Monday morning ballet class. I already started negotiating in my mind: OK, if I miss one week that won't be so bad. I can jump back into my pieces, catch up on school work, prove myself in my technique classes. A few days went by, and I realized this debilitating disease wasn't going anywhere. Before my colonoscopy, I was making multiple trips to the bathroom during every technique class, trying to explain to my professors I wasn't being rude or uninterested in class. I barely made it on the walk back to my apartment, desperate to find a bathroom. I endured excruciating pain and struggled to get out of bed. But somehow, I kept going to all my classes, not telling anyone but my roommate how much I was suffering. At that point I'd lost 20 pounds. I guess that's how you end up in an emergency colonoscopy, and then on your living room couch. When really, I should have been at the ballet barre instead. But I wasn't going back to the barre anytime soon. I was forced to withdraw from my studies as a sophomore, not sure when I'd return to school, let alone dancing.

That Winter Quarter was the longest quarter of my life. Day in and day out, I woke up, waltzed downstairs to the couch. I would cry for an hour or two and make my mom listen to some nonsense about my life being over, take a nap, and wake up and do it all over again. I still feel bad to this day for what I put my mom through. At that point, the worst was yet to come. After a month of heavy steroid treatment and trials with other medicine, I was worse off than before my diagnosis. On February 22nd, I began my first round of what would be 15-plus doses of chemotherapy infusions to put my disease into remission. Almost immediately, I began seeing improvement and feeling better, which shifted my focus to getting back to school. After 4 doses,

I was re-enrolled at UC Irvine for the Spring Semester. I was doing the minimal requirements, so as to not lose my spot as a dance major.

Being at school while undergoing chemotherapy is exactly what you would imagine it to be. I'd wake up, eat breakfast, throw up my breakfast, show up to class, struggle through my one technique class which was ballet. I would go to all my academic classes, go back to my apartment, and flop onto my bed with exhaustion. My immune system was so weak from the medicine, I'd catch every cold that went through the dance department, and contracted staph skin infections from the floor of the studios.

At this point you're probably wondering why I didn't give up dancing. You're not wrong for wondering. And to be honest, inside, I had given it up. I was taking a class in education, thinking that Fall quarter of my junior year I'd drop the dance major and figure out a new career path as a school teacher. How can someone going through chemotherapy and with a chronic illness expect to have a career in dance? In my mind, I scoffed at myself and realized just how naïve and dumb I was. This was probably my all-time low in my life. Nothing could have been worse than internally giving up my dream, not even chronic diarrhea or chemotherapy.

This is where my story turns around. Now, I look back and understand how I felt in those moments, but, seriously, what the hell was I thinking? All it took was a couple weeks of going to classes with education majors (no offense to them!) for me to realize that giving up my dream of graduating as a dance major and pursuing a career in dance was far more painful and miserable than any dose of chemotherapy or another trip to the bathroom. This was my "take-back-my-life moment." I know that my life might be shortened by my disease and because of the medication that I've taken. But, I will not allow myself to regret not becoming a dance teacher, choreographer, or performer. Life becomes so scary when you deny who you are, scarier than any diagnosis.

Dancing has been the thing that has taken my mind off of the reality that I face each day. It gives me motivation to take care of myself, to take my medicine, to do the things I need to do to be healthy. Being healthy means being a dancer. When I dance, I become less frustrated with what my body cannot do, or what is wrong with my body. Each day when I show up in class to dance, I am immediately thankful for being able to move my body, to be well enough to be there in the space. Of course, there are some days when I'm in pain and suffering. I don't claim to be some fountain of optimism. However, it is hard to stay negative when I'm dancing because I just become happy with all the wonderful things my body is able to do.

Able. This is the word that is key for those with chronic illness and struggling to find inspiration. Individuals with chronic illness are able to do many things. We are able to look normal, we are able to be in public, we are even able to dance. Every day might not be our best, but we are able to do whatever it is our body allows, which is something to be thankful for. Dancing, no matter how big or small, fast or slow, complex or simple, is a sign of capability. It allows for a focus on the positive. Dance is my hope, and dance is my future.

Madeleine Schreifels graduated from UC Irvine in 2018 with a B.A. in Dance and a B.A. in French Language & Literature. She now resides in Ventura, California, teaching and choreographing dance at Ventura High School and at Santa Barbara Dance Arts. She hopes to earn her teaching credentials to teach French in public school.