

Michael Gardos Reid: The Evolution of a Dance/Movement Therapist

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE



Michael Gardos Reid and a colleague in an Authentic Movement training in the 1990s. Photo provided by Michael Gardos Reid.

YOU CAN'T WRITE STORIES ABOUT the profound impact of dance on people's lives without wondering: Why? Especially if you are a psychology major. What is the science behind these transformations? How can people seemingly heal from health challenges, overcome trauma or other emotional barriers, make difficult transitions, or find new purpose in life just by moving their bodies?

I never heard of Dance/Movement Therapy in my psychology studies. But it is real. Dance/Movement Therapy is the meeting place of creative movement, body-mind awareness and psychotherapy. Today there are about 1200 certified Dance/Movement Therapists (DMTs) in the United States, a field dominated primarily by women. I set

out to find one or more of them to help me find answers. I emailed the secretary of the Minnesota Chapter of the American Dance Therapy Association for help.

Michael Gardos Reid, Minnesota Chapter Secretary, messaged back, his name so familiar. He is a dance therapist with Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis, one of just 3-4% of male DMTs in the country. But the Michael Reid I knew long ago never showed interest in dance. Or so I thought.

It was him, the son of Liz Reid, a woman I loved as a second mother. Liz was my campaign manager for five successful elections to the Minnesota Senate. Michael, just a year older than me, probably dropped literature for a

campaign or two. Last I saw him was when I was invited to eulogize his mom at her celebration of life in December, 2017.

I'm convinced Liz had something to do with our reunion.

This two-part story is about how dance came into both our lives while we were in our 30s, unknowing of the other. Dance affected us in different ways, but with equal life-changing results. This month's story is about Michael's journey. Next month I'll share parallels from my own dance journey, informed by learnings from basic science behind DMT. The parallels are uncanny.

The birth of Michael the dancer starts in pre-kindergarten. New to North Minneapolis and a younger kid on the block, Michael wanted to be part of the neighborhood show the kids created. Since the show was nearly complete, he was told "you can do dance routines between every skit." He did, between every number. When the Beatles arose during his elementary years in Crystal, "I went nuts. I thought it was the greatest." He described his dance as "ecstatic," not structured. "During middle school, people told me: 'you shouldn't dance now, that's for later.' They were probably jealous because I was having so much fun. Such a wild guy. I just kept dancing and dancing."

He attended the University of Minnesota in his 20s, but soon dropped out. "I couldn't figure out which of 10 or 12 things I found most interesting did

I really want to do? I'd wander around, and at a big school you can wander a long time and nobody notices. Some take a gap year; I took a 'gap decade.' When I left school I wanted to be a cultural revolutionary, a person who organizes participatory arts events like improv theatre or music events. But I didn't know how to organize, and I didn't have many mentors. So by the end of my 20s, I got physically sick trying to make things happen, but not taking care of myself. I had three difficult winters in a row with lung congestion and probably depression."

The third winter Michael tried going back to school, he was motivated to get books at the library. He read psychologist Carl Jung, "and I started having all these amazing dreams." Jung talks about the "shadow," the part of yourself that you don't want to deal with or relate to. Michael's dreams became intense and violent. "Finally I figured out that my dreams were the symbol of being strongly emotional. I was such a nice guy since my high school days, and I needed to develop my ability to disagree with people—to be more firm, angry and sharp with people. When I came around to that idea, the dreams calmed down, and I popped up like a cork." He underwent acupuncture and discovered "something bigger than me in the universe." He wanted more of that. So at age 27, he started studying Tai Chi intensively, taking classes and attending retreats around the country. That balanced him, and his life became more manageable. He also sought counseling. But sitting down in therapy was hard for him. "I was in my head so much. I was a very smart kid so I would overthink everything. I would get more and more depressed when the therapist asked me things; I felt ashamed or stuck. If this had been 20 years later, they probably would have put me on antidepressants."

Michael stayed focused on Tai Chi. While studying at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, Michael happened upon a woman teaching an introductory dance therapy workshop. He got very excited about that class. Though Tai Chi centered him and relaxed him into his life, it didn't help him process those emotions so difficult for him. He decided he wanted to become a dance therapist. He started studying with Marylee Hardenbergh, one of the few trained dance therapists in the Twin Cities at the time who was teaching at the University of Minnesota.

About two weeks into the class, he realized, "No, the first thing I want before becoming a Dance Therapist is to get some dance therapy. As they say, 'doctor, heal thyself.'" So he shifted from student to client, attending dance therapy sessions about once a month.

The first session they talked. "How are you feeling?" she asked. "I don't know. I'm tied up in knots about it," he replied. "So why don't you get up and walk around a little and see what you find out," she said. "And I got up and I took one, two, three steps, and I immediately knew what I was feeling. When you stand up, your breath is more engaged, you're more in action. I process more through my sensations. From the time I was four years old, dance was a primary language for me. If I'm going to express conflicts or difficult emotions, movement is just normal."

Sessions were powerful for Michael. In one session, "I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to have her sit on one side of the room and not say anything for the first half hour. Not getting into verbal was important to me. I went to the other side of the room and sat down against the wall. I started moving my hands, almost like painting with my hands on the floor in front of me. It seemed almost like

I was pushing out and creating a space around me on the floor. It felt so good. She's watching me. I've got my space and I'm creating more space for myself. I was the eldest of seven children and we lived in pretty tight quarters. The idea of having my own space and this person's singular attention and not having to explain myself, somehow added up to what I needed. I could own my space and become my own self."

Wow. My thoughts turned to my own experience. When I started dance, was I looking for my own space, away from my intense career? How many people start dance unknowingly searching for their own space? Or expressing emotions that are hard to express in another way?

Michael's third insight from dance therapy was perhaps even more universal. As sessions progressed, "I felt like I wanted to have (my therapist's) support in a physical way. Growing up as the eldest of many siblings, though my mother was a very physical person, she tended to be taken up by a new child every couple years. I could often get her ear, but she wasn't able to put her arm around me because she was busy holding a new baby. I wanted physical support that would be like nurturing me. My therapist and I clarified that we were not trying to be romantic. We worked out where I could lean on her while she sat on the floor, she could give me a hug, or she would let me put my head on her shoulder as a form of expressing 'I've got some support for you.' That would be hard to translate in a verbal psychotherapy session. From my ability to take things in, someone saying they support me, I don't know if I would have really believed or absorbed it. But having the physical expression of support in my life, I not only started to feel able to take risks to have more healthy intimacy in all of my relationships, but I could start

to grow a new romantic relationship, which eventually led to the person who was my first wife.”

OMG. This also struck home for me. I walked into my first dance studio at age 35 for one reason—to find a husband. Yes, I found a husband, but not in the way I imagined. Dance allowed me the freedom to express my emotions and be comfortable with the intimacy of touch. It worked.

Michael felt empowered. He had a new direction. He was committed to Dance/Movement Therapy. He finished his Bachelor’s Degree at Metro State at age 32, with courses in dance history, physiology, and beginning counseling psychology. He received a Masters in Counseling Psychology and Dance/Movement Therapy from Antioch University New England. At 35, he started his new career in New Hampshire with supervised clients,

then at an outpatient clinic serving people with developmental disabilities and emotional challenges. He worked with children as well. He moved to a geriatric psych unit, developing group work where he would get people moving together as a way of feeling connected and expressing their feelings. Two years later, Michael returned to his Twin Cities roots and was hired as a Dance/Movement Therapist (DMT) at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis. DMT had been a core practice in their mental health unit since 1970. Michael is still there 31 years later, now age 68. His second wife was also a Dance/Movement Therapist when they met, both of them working at Abbott Northwestern.

As for dance? While Michael earned his Bachelor’s degree, he took dance classes to help train as a dance therapist, including ballet, modern

dance, Tai Chi, and contact improv. Ballroom dancing? Not for him. “I tend to be a more ecstatic dancer,” Michael explained. “So last on my list is this idea of predicting to someone close to me what I will do next or telegraphing that to them so they could be in harmony with me or make their own choices.” Indeed, Michael and his first wife tried studying swing dance prior to their marriage, “and it was almost the end of our relationship. We both said, ‘you’re not doing it right.’ That would never work, at least without a sense of humor.” In later years, his friend Don DeBoer, an educational psychologist and Salsa teacher (see May issue), was the first person to teach Michael partner dance successfully.

I laughed when Michael shared this story. It reminded me of the short note I had just rediscovered during my “pandemic house clean” from motherly Liz. She wrote it for a long-ago engagement party for my future husband and me:

Ingredients for a Long Happy Marriage: Love, Respect, Sense of Humor Forgive and Forget Hugging.

Thanks, Liz. Great advice for marriage, and for dance partners too.

Next month: Ember Reichgott Junge identifies parallels with Michael’s story in her personal dance journey, grounded in a few fundamentals of Dance/Movement Therapy. E



Michael Gardos Reid and his son, around 2003.

Photo provided by Michael Gardos Reid.