

I WAS APPROACHING MY 35<sup>TH</sup> birthday. I was anxious and probably depressed, just like I felt on my 30th birthday. From all outward signs, I was quite successful, traveling pathways as a young attorney and Minnesota state senator that few women pursued in late 1970s and early 1980s. But something was missing.

I didn't have that special someone in my life. Nothing seemed to work; I'd go out on a few dates, but no one was up to my standards. Or maybe my standards were impossible for any human to reach. I chalked it all up to my intense, career-driven, overfilled life.

By age 35, I was becoming more desperate. My biological clock was ticking. So I took radical action. I reached deep down to find courage to walk into an Arthur Murray Dance studio with one purpose in mind—to find a husband.

Fast forward to today. I've been happily married for over 27 years to Mike, who doesn't dance a step unless he's had five beers. Yes, my plan worked, but not in the way I imagined. Something in that first dance studio changed me. For the first time I had a safe place to be me, to let go, to not worry about "looking good." I could make a mistake, be vulnerable, and laugh at myself and with others. I could dance with a partner and not worry about whether he liked me or thought me attractive. I could just focus on the joy of the movement, the beat of the music, and the dance picture we were creating together.

As I learned new steps, my confidence grew. I discovered the child in me and the pure joy and fun that went with that. I forgot the worries of the world and the state budget and became a person full of life, love, and joy who loved sharing all of that with another person. That's the person I came to be when I met Mike.

## Finding my Authentic Self Through Dance

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE



*Then-Senator Ember Reichgott celebrates National Ballroom Dance Week in the early 1990s at the Minnesota State Capitol with her instructor, the late Jesse Smith of Arthur Murray Dance Studios. Photo provided by Ember Reichgott Junge.*

When Mike called me for our second date, I had a dance showcase that night. Would he come? He agreed. I guess you'll do anything for a date if you're interested enough. That was the first and nearly last time Mike would watch me dance. It wasn't his thing. So we made a bargain for our wedding day—I wouldn't teach Mike to dance and he wouldn't teach me to golf. We've happily kept our promises.

My personal transformation sparked my life-long curiosity as to why dance had this powerful impact on me and others. It drove me to co-create with Andrea Mirenda the nonprofit Heart of Dance, where we could bring all this to 5th and 8th graders in Minnesota. And it is driving me now to explore and write the stories of others, including those who understand the science of Dance/Movement Therapy, like my friend Michael Gardos Reid (see last issue).

As I listened to Michael's story, I could feel the emotions rise in me. Both of us entered the dance world in

our 30s. We both studied psychology. We both loved his mother, Liz, who was my campaign manager for five successful senate campaigns. And we both discovered authenticity through dance.

Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) has been around a long time. Michael has been a Dance/Movement Therapist at Abbott Northwestern Hospital for 31 years. There he started using DMT with people with psychotic disorders in the locked units—people dealing with psychosis, bipolar, severe depression, schizophrenia, suicidality, and aggressive behavior disorders. Then he moved to outpatient mental health programs, helping people with anxiety and depression; people who could be on their own at night and safely deal with their emotions.

According to Michael, there are two groups of people that DMT can help. The first is people for whom verbal representation of what happened to them is not available to them or isn't natural. They may have experienced something when they were pre-verbal or children



*Ember Reichgott Junge completes her first solo in competition with instructor Scott Anderson at a Snowball Dance around 2015. Photo provided by Ember Reichgott Junge.*

who lacked verbal understanding. Or sometimes verbal presentation just doesn't do the best job for them. These people can be helped if we pay attention to their non-verbal expression and help them observe it.

The other group is for people for whom expressing themselves verbally is too comfortable. Said Michael, "For some of us, we can give a really good show at therapy. For me, I was overthinking all the time. I was trying to mastermind what my therapy was going to be about. For some folks something like authentic movement allows going underneath our social shell and getting into different parts of ourselves that we might need to visit for various reasons. But we don't exactly know how to get there because we are so good at looking OK and presenting ourselves to everybody."

Count me in the second group! When I became a career woman in my twenties, I instinctively thought I had to act like a man. I had to be professional. I had to be perfect. God knows,

I couldn't make a mistake, at least publicly. I wore those little ties at the neck, like a man's bow tie. I dressed in perfectly matched suits with little jewelry. One reporter described me as "perfectly coiffed." I thought that was a compliment; now I realize he was describing my inauthenticity. Ouch. I was all about "looking good" for my constituents, the media, and whoever was watching, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The only time I let down and played was far away on vacation. And even then when I visited Club Med in Mexico, I worried a photo of me would show up and ruin my career.

I noticed, however, there was one place where I could be someone else, and perhaps that was my unknown "authentic me." It was with music. In college I performed in musical theatre and traveled the world in the singing group Up with People. In the senate, my best friends were colleagues who would play guitars and sing with me after hours. I didn't need alcohol.

Music lifted my heart. I loved to sing, but I rarely danced.

"Dance can be a healer," responded Michael. "When I first started as a dance therapist I had to be very careful, because it is a powerful medium. Here in the Midwest, people don't move a lot. It's not a dancing culture."

For this Midwesterner, even without formal dance therapy, dance opened doors and "healed" me in ways I didn't think possible. Not only could I be myself, but I could safely touch a man and not worry about his intentions. I could explore my femininity and "try on" elegance in movement and in lovely dresses that hugged my body. I became more comfortable and trusting around multiple male dance partners. I could laugh with them, be vulnerable, relax and enjoy. I could be myself—not like at the legislature, where women legislators might be approached by male lobbyists and colleagues with sexual intentions to yield a desired legislative outcome.

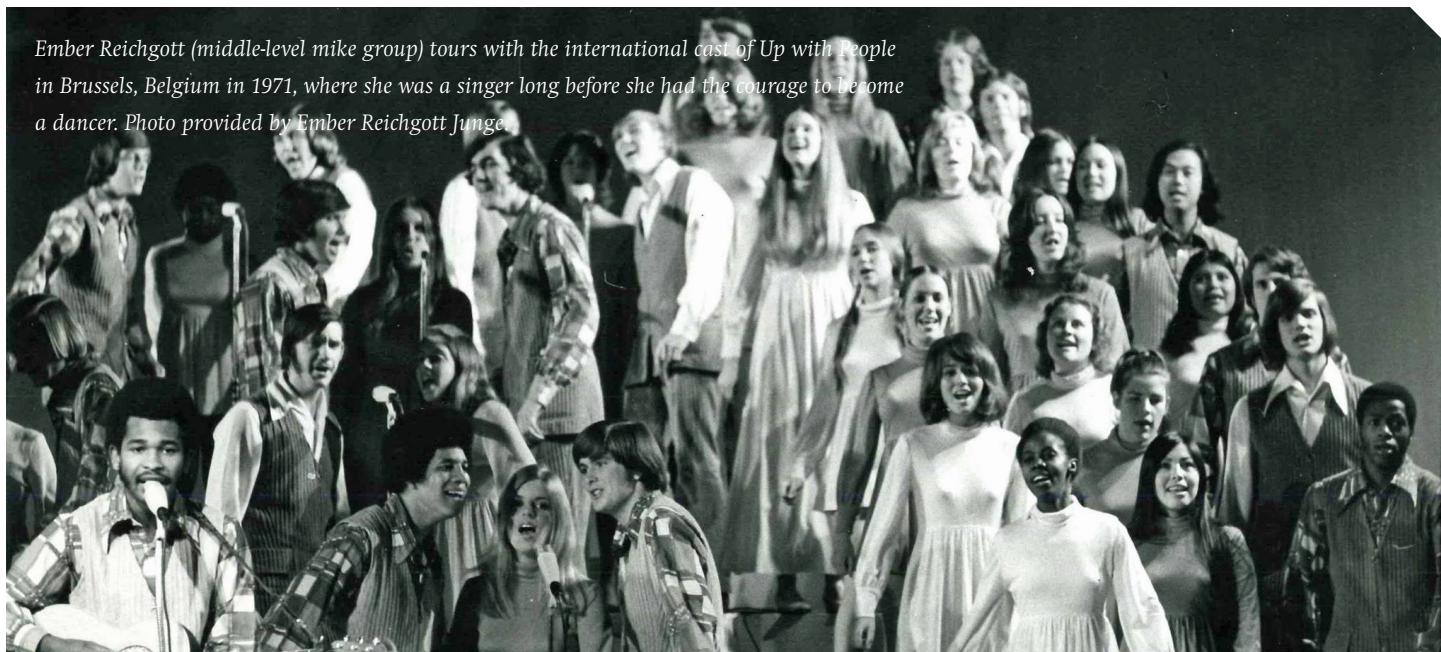
Most importantly, I could discover my (hidden) authentic self. I could love myself. And I could love Mike, my future husband, when he entered my life.

Michael, the DMT, took that authenticity journey differently as a client of a dance therapist. During one session, he sat on the floor and pushed his hands outward around him as if he was creating space around him. For him, it felt good. "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."

So powerful. How many people start dance unknowingly searching for their own space? Was I looking for my own space, away from my intense career



*Ember Reichgott (middle-level mike group) tours with the international cast of Up with People in Brussels, Belgium in 1971, where she was a singer long before she had the courage to become a dancer. Photo provided by Ember Reichgott Jung.*



and the eyes of the world? I remember attending a studio dance party during an intense, highly visible time when I was one of three deciding votes on whether to grant a large state aid package to our local airline, Northwest Airlines. As I enjoyed a lovely rumba with a dance acquaintance, he asked, “How are you voting on Northwest Airlines?” It was like a gut punch; I felt he invaded my safe space. I couldn’t control my emotions. I stepped on his foot and abruptly thanked him for the dance and returned to my seat. I’ve often regretted that visceral reaction.

Sometimes we need space from our families, and dance can be a healer there too. DMT Michael shared such a story, ironically, about an airlines employee. “I had a guy come to me who was a former air force pilot, and his father was the same. The son had this inner war going on. Father wants him to be at least a co-pilot, if not a pilot, of a commercial airliner. Does he really want to do that? We did authentic movement for a long time and I would support him and have him listen to himself. ‘If I walk around like a pilot, does that feel like me? Am I

faking it? Am I doing it for Dad, more than for me?’ He figured out he was going for co-pilot. He was finally able to cure and hear himself enough just through moving. Kind of like what you said, Ember. He had to get behind the persona of having to present himself in a certain way for the comfort of other people. He was empowered by this.”

This is an example of “Authentic Movement,” developed by dance therapist Mary Starks Whitehouse. It incorporates movement to promote self-exploration and improved mental health. While different from learning ballroom dance, I wonder if some elements aren’t in parallel. “Authentic movement is an invitation to have a waking dream through movement,” explained Michael. In authentic movement, with a minimum of two people, one person takes the role of witness with eyes open, ready to support through witnessing and watching the other person’s movement process. The other person, the mover, will close their eyes in the space and await being moved. The mover doesn’t consciously choose to do any particular dance routine, shape or posture; they listen to

their body and watch as any movement unfolds spontaneously. That person explores whatever is going on with him right then and there. It’s a way to work through emotions, such as getting in touch with grief, that is not available to the person if he just sat there and talked. After the time is over, the two reflect on the experience.

Michael cautions that it might be difficult for trained dancers to just be in their own experience, and not “present” in a certain way. However, I know from my years of social and competitive dance that many dancers improvise intentionally and sometimes unknowingly on the dance floor. Are we expressing our authentic selves? What are we trying to tell ourselves? I’ll never look at our rumbas in the same way again.

Ember Reichgott Jung is an amateur ballroom dancer and retired co-founder of Heart of Dance. She is writing a book entitled “Stories of Resilience from the Ballroom Dancer’s Heart.” She welcomes your inspiring stories at [ember.reichgott@gmail.com](mailto:ember.reichgott@gmail.com). **E**