

Armenia Gave Me Dance

In 1998 I was teaching at an international school in Dresden, Germany. One morning in early October as I was bustling to grab a roll and a juice before hopping on the tram to meet with the difficult parents of an equally difficult eight year-old, walking, I crossed an alley at a four-way intersection and a driver blindly made a turn and hit me. I'd only been in Dresden about five weeks, and the next five I spent in a hospital, my left leg the main victim of a break -- my tibia plateau had been cracked and I needed to wear a plate bolted to my shin bone for the next year.

Until that point I had been an overly energetic twenty-something. Overnight my injury made me feel and act as if I were four times my age.

Six months later I still walked with a very visible limp, prompting one blind date never to call me back. On vacation later in 1999, I was ashamed that I, who'd once been a serious booty shaker, lost a "how low can you go" limbo contest at a festival in Spain to a woman thirty years my senior. Along with being unable to turn as I could before, my injury also had left me unable to bend my left leg completely or to squat.

The next five years I battled pain on my left side, bouts of limping, and a tender left shoulder. Although a vegetarian, I popped enough glucosamine (cow cartilage)-chondroitin (fish cartilage) tablets to replace lost cartilage in my knee that I could have opened my own butcher shop. I took yoga and walked, but neither of those put me back anywhere close to the range of movement I'd had during my pre-accident days.

Then, in the summer of 2004, I came to Yerevan, Armenia on a creative writing Fulbright to research a novel. As I knew services were inexpensive in Yerevan, I'd thought, gosh, maybe once I am there, I can hire a personal trainer or something. Maybe in addition to writing my novel, I can also get my body straightened out.

Within my first night or two in the country, an author from Yerevan I'd met in Los Angeles called me and said, you have to come with me to Disco Monte Cristo. Sure, I said. I am up to almost anything.

What a surprise! Before I left LA, my Armenian acquaintances in the States had warned me: wear black, don't show too much skin, there isn't much real nightlife, Armenians are very conservative.

I found all of the above to be true. I also found all of the above to be false. Depends on where you are and whom you are with (same could be said of many places in America). Conservative and modest is certainly not what I saw in Monte Cristo, a then French-Armenian owned nightspot

What did I see?

The best booty-shaking I have ever seen guys do in my entire life. Had I fallen through a hole and into heaven where straight guys can wiggle their hips and shimmy their shoulders and still be considered manly? Oh, and the women were wearing spaghetti straps... if that much.

And these guys inspired me. People had come to shake it all loose. As I danced, I began to feel a little less self-conscious. Although I couldn't thump down to the ground like I used to, all of the arm-shaking and shoulder-twisting introduced me to another focus-- away from my legs and onto my upper body.

The rest of my time in Armenia, I became a regular at this disco.

However, the real turning point for me happened also only a few days later. During a summer street festival a group of people in long traditional costumes dancing in a circle caused me to stop in my tracks. They were dancing Armenian folk dances. I'd never seen anything like it: soft, fast -- movements of community, movements of national expression. And the way the women slid as if gliding on air! Graceful and fluid, with discipline that was exact and gentle. My heart raced. I'd found it! That was what I wanted, too! Me, a hardened and cynical American. I wanted to be able to move like that.

A day or two thereafter a trip to the information center on Nalbandyan got me the phone number and address of a former member of the National Ensemble for Armenian Dance, now a dancer in the Ensemble of Dance Veterans headed by Vanut Xanamiryan and the leader of his own dance company, Ensemble Erebuni. I hopped on mashrutni taxi (minibus) #6 holding the directions to Erebuni Palast (palace) in my hand in Armenian.

About a fifteen minute ride from Republic Square I stumbled out in front of a decaying youth center (if palace ever was a misnomer, this was it!) and found a fiftiesh guy with gray hair digging with a shovel in the back courtyard and pouring concrete. This was Azat Nikogosyan, the guy I'd been sent to find. He was a little taken back by this foreign woman stumbling in on him, mumbling in Russian... but we agreed I'd come back that afternoon and watch him rehearse with his student groups.

As I sat in the gymnasium, its run-down conditions and warped floor faded away as young women walked in time together, and like the lace they wore on their costumes, their dancing was intricate, woven, intertwining, forming circles to bend back and open the scene, spreading and closing like the cycles of the lives of flowers.

Sitting down from where he'd been calling out moves, in fact, Azat explained to me, the name, the formations, and even the embroidery worked together to express the dance. Thus, if the dance is named for a flower, then formations expressed this flower. Dances from the mountains are edgier -- like hopping from place to place.

After a brief pause, the women returned to the floor, took up the dance again, their arms twirling deliberately; they highlighted their eyes with sweeping motions from their

fingers; as they grasped each other hands and turned, my gaze swept upward towards the peaks and bows their arms created: maybe they bathed in open nature or they picked flowers in the sun, tended a garden and gathered vegetables in their aprons -- movements of a people with time; movements of people that take the time to use their senses.

I wanted some of what Azat gave those women -- an ability to be light, graceful, but physically untortured. Could I, a modern American woman, have something to learn about how to move as a woman from dances stemming originally out of an "unenlightened" era? How I could look at myself in the mirror, and instead of finding and concentrating on the flaws, want to watch myself dance as much as I enjoyed watching these women? Could I look in the mirror as that lively, modern, urban creature that is me circles her arms and calls forth something in herself that lets her find kinship with a field flower?

That night when I flipped on Armenian MTV, the pop stars' movements seemed to possess only one tone: hip-grinding, crotch-thrusting, as if dance were stuck in some Freudian complex in which everything had to be primal, and yes, maybe infantile. By contrast, the Armenian dances I saw that day had soloists, but they did not stand alone for long before they were brought back into the circle. The Armenian dances I saw were dances of communication, dances of community.

I started private classes with Azat that week: an hour of classical ballet training as a warm up, then an hour of classical Armenian dance. After my first lesson, I couldn't get up and down without leg pain. I took a little weekend trip a few days thereafter but couldn't bear climbing in out of the van. Aware of my initial limitations, in subsequent classes Azat and I worked around the problems with my legs. We sorted out the stiffness in my shoulders. With time I began to come twice a week instead of once. Although losing weight had not been a goal, by Christmas I'd dropped a size, by May, another one.

And each week I learned endless steps. By April, I never thought I'd ever know enough or be able to remember enough to pull off dancing a complete set of combinations.

Then like the old blues song goes (or something like this), sometimes you don't know you got it bad till you got it good.

One day in early May, I walked into the dance studio and could do thirty legs-together lifts in the air. Muscles in my stomach appeared I hadn't even known existed. I could follow Azat as he led me through a piece he'd choreographed for his troupe. Although my left knee still popped when I did a deep bend, I could finally maneuver my legs into a respectable first position (heels together, feet at 180 degrees).

And like the day when a kid that has been grueling away at learning piano scales suddenly finds she can play a sonata, I began to find I could slide across the floor. Without vein-popping effort, I could twirl my hands in the position Armenians term "malalik."

My friends there kept asking if I was going to have a performance. But I didn't have to arrange one. Armenia arranged one for me.

Apparently, earlier in the year some movers and shakers in Yerevan decided to top the *Guinness Book of World Record's* record for the biggest dance. On Armenian Independence Day more than 150,000 people traveled to the largest mountain in Armenia, Mt. Aragats, circled her, linked hands and danced around her. Of course, I also went.

A local sculptor friend invited me to stay at her house. The next morning, we packed lunches, and with her kids, nieces and nephews, and an Armenian friend from Lebanon, we gathered at a designated departure point and took a mashrutni to the mountain.

At 2:40 PM, we took our places along the road, and along with thousands of other people, we stepped back and forth to traditional music.

But my real test didn't come until an hour later, after the dancers gathered at a stage while people sang folk-pop songs. Ten songs in, thirty or more of us formed a circle. A little, senior woman on my left called out moves. I kept up with the endless shifts: feet crossing behind, forward, kicks, hops, bounces, arms lifting up and down. I danced in their community. I danced with these people to celebrate a oneness.

The next week my jaw dropped as I played back the videotape Azat had a friend make of me as I went through our classical training and then danced four of the completes I knew: a Russian one and three Armenian dances.

As I saw the tape, I could not believe that person was me-- the woman who'd once limped because she was hit by a car. I twirled my arms. I hopped and kicked. I glided as if moving across water.

I came to Armenia, not knowing what to expect, what I would find. I came to do academic and oral research and to write, but I am also thankful that something maybe equally as important occurred: Armenia gave me back my moving body, free of many of the last seven years of hindrances and hang-ups. This supposedly very conservative society taught me to move again, and to move with pleasure.

I will never be (and never was) as thin as a classical dancer, but I don't care; thanks to Azat and Monte Cristo, I am again quite strong. I am again reconnected with the person I was before my accident -- a person that loved to move. Along with the research I completed, something else invaluable happened: Armenia gave dance back to me!