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Why the solar plexus and bare feet matter in modern dance

by Emily Hongsermeier

Last year in a Modern 4 class with Professor Charlotte Griffin, we were working on a phrase that focused on initiation and breath. Professor Griffin emphasized the importance of the solar plexus and encouraged us to think about how movement can begin from that area of the body. She asked us to imagine breathing into the solar plexus and allowing the chest to expand as we inhaled, letting that breath guide the movement outward through the arms and torso. This moment immediately reminded me of the work and philosophy of Isadora Duncan, who believed that movement should originate from the solar plexus and that breath and natural movement were essential to expressive dancing.

Remembering this idea helped me think differently about how I approached the phrase we were learning. Instead of simply performing the steps or focusing on the shape of my arms and legs, I tried to initiate the movement from my center. When the phrase began with a slight contraction and release through the torso, I focused on letting my breath expand my chest first, then allowing the movement to travel outward through my shoulders and arms. This made the movement feel more organic and less forced.

Another connection to dance history happened when Professor Griffin encouraged us to begin taking class barefoot instead of wearing socks. She explained that certain techniques are easier to access when we are barefoot because we can feel the floor more clearly and develop a stronger sense of grounding. This reminded me again of early modern dance pioneers like Duncan, who famously rejected ballet shoes and performed barefoot to emphasize a natural connection between the body and the earth. Inspired by this historical idea, I paid closer attention to how my feet connected with the floor throughout class. When shifting weight or moving through turns and traveling phrases, I tried to feel the pressure of the floor through the entire foot rather than sliding across it the way socks sometimes encourage.

When I actively tried to combine these historical ideas with the phrase, I noticed a difference in the quality of my movement. In one section of the phrase we moved from a low plié into a forward reach of the arms before spiraling the torso and traveling across the floor. Instead of simply lifting my arms upward, I imagined the breath expanding my solar plexus first and then sending energy through my ribcage, shoulders, and finally through my fingertips. The reach felt less like a shape and more like a continuous expansion of the body. When we transitioned into the spiral of the torso, I focused on allowing the ribcage to lead the twist rather than turning only from my shoulders, which created a fuller rotation through the spine.

Dancing barefoot also changed how I executed the traveling section. I focused on pressing through the pads of my feet as I shifted my weight, feeling the push from the floor before stepping into the next movement. This grounded quality made my transitions smoother and gave the phrase a heavier, more connected feeling to the floor, which aligns with many early modern dance values.

By consciously applying these historical ideas—initiating movement from the solar plexus and emphasizing the grounded connection of bare feet—I felt like I was not only performing the choreography but also embodying principles that dancers like Duncan explored more than a century ago. This experience showed me that dance history is not just something we study academically, but something that can actively shape how we move in the studio today.

Emily Hongsermeier will be a junior at University of California, Irvine, expecting to graduate with BFA in Dance Performance and a BA in Educational Sciences in June 2028.