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“Don’t worry, I am going to be okay!”

Sometimes, you have to reassure your parents that majoring in dance is not so crazy—there are actually careers out there, and a good education can lead you in many directions.

by Sarah Hong

As graduation nears, I hear myself saying, “Don’t worry, I am going to be okay!” in response to the dreaded question, “What are you going to do with a degree in dance?” Coming from parents who are first-generation immigrants, it reflects their concerns. Choosing to get an education in dance was an absolutely absurd choice to them, and it was definitely an uphill battle to finally get them to come to terms with my decision. Along with many other aspirational immigrant parents, they came to America to work for “a better life” for their children. Unfortunately for dance majors, that “better” life means being a doctor, lawyer, pharmacist, engineer or any profession along that route. Dancer was nowhere to be seen on that list.

This made me wonder why those professions stand out above being a dancer. The first, obvious reason? Money. In America, money is tied to success and power. Most immigrant families started off with low economic status upon arriving, so it’s only natural for parents to not want their beloved children working as hard as they did for every penny earned. I believe there is a second, underlying reason as well, and that is the unfamiliarity of dance as a career. The notion of the “starving artist” is most prevalent when a parent is first informed that their child is choosing a career in dance. They are not aware that within the last decade or so, dance has played a more significant role in people’s lives and the opportunities that come with dance are grand. The rise in awareness of dance careers can be credited to the increase of dance in media. Dance shows like *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *Dance Moms* along with dance films like the *Step Up* series, *Stomp the Yard* and *Make It Happen* have made dancing more visible and may have helped remind society how important it is to keep dancing alive.

Even so—do most people understand that there can be success after graduating as a dance major? It took a while even for me to come to this conclusion, which delayed my decision to major in dance. My parents were very much against me choosing dance as a career and did everything they could to make me believe that dance wasn’t the right path for *anyone*, especially me. In my case, I believe my decision was made because dance chose me just as much as I chose it. I wouldn’t accept the idea that a dance career is impossible to obtain, so I searched for ways I could possibly make a living using a dance education.

So, one may wonder, what can life look like with a dance degree? The more well-known options include performing, choreographing, and teaching dance. A dancer can perform in many ways including professional companies of all styles of dance, in music videos, on tour with singers, yachts, parades, professional sports teams, etc. All of these performances require a choreographer too, another skill learned and practiced at universities. Teachers are needed at various places such as dance studios, high school dance teams, and colleges and universities.

Although dance performance is probably the greatest passion among most dance majors, it is often not their only passion. For example, if a second interest is writing, he or she can look into being a dance critic, a writer of articles for dance magazines, or maybe even publish a book about dance. Having a dance education will only make someone that much more qualified for the job. The desire to dance can also be interlaced with a desire to be strong, fit, and healthy. You can become an instructor for Pilates, Yoga or Zumba classes. With all the hype about fitness/health classes, there is a high demand for such instructors. A dancer can also become a personal trainer in fitness or a health nutritionist. Since dancers spend the majority of the day on their feet, there is constantly wear and tear on the bones and joints through overuse or sometimes even injury. A physical therapist could be the correct career choice for you if science interests you, to help those dancers with their pain and rehabilitation. Some dancers really care about organization, leadership, and guidance. If this is the case, dance administration or dance counselors are viable options as more sustainable careers. Without a doubt, the options are endless.

Whether the ultimate career choice is the original dancing goal or not, it is important to understand you are *not* settling for a second choice or Plan B. Dance degrees earned after countless of hours in the studio are not wasted simply because the initial plan of performing with a professional touring company or living life as a renowned choreographer did not pan out. Reaching for that dream, despite the doubts loved ones around you have expressed, is a success in itself. Have comfort in knowing no matter what career you end up in, even if it is not what you thought it would be, can still mean success. Success is in the eye of the beholder, so acknowledge that wherever your dance degree takes you, that place is right where you are supposed to be.

When dealing with parents, or any loved ones, who may not overtly support your decision of choosing an unlikely, “impractical” major, know that their concerns are not greater than their love for you. In some cases like mine and in the bestselling book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, the parents will eventually put aside their aspiration for you in order to keep a healthy, loving relationship with you. The definition of a tiger mom is “a mother raising her children in a traditional Chinese way, including strict rules, tough love, and discipline to get children to succeed.” In Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, she describes herself as a mother who grew up with first-immigrant parenting and had to “battle” her own daughters, especially her second one, when trying to push that same “tiger mom” parenting style. Although Chua identifies herself as a tiger mom, she stated in an interview with ABC news, “You have to listen to your kid, love comes first. When I realized I was going to lose my daughter, I pulled back because nothing is more important than the relationship with my daughter.”

Although it may not seem like it at times, the lack of support from aspirational parents or loved ones can come from a good place. If you’re fortunate enough, parents will start listening to what your passion is, especially if they feel like the relationship will be compromised. Whenever worried parents fret about your future, simply ease some of their stress with, “Don’t worry, I am going to be okay!” because the truth of the matter is, everything will be okay.
