

Stewardship Circle: Being En Pointe: Dancing with our gifts

By Bruce Anderson

Ballet, according to Eliza Minden¹, started as “a man’s game.” In the 1600’s, King Louis XIV of France was a dancer, and later founded the Académie Royale de Danse. While the beauty of ballet was undeniable, it was also used to remind patrons of the power of the throne. Dancers at the palace would be sure to perform elaborate bows and curtsies to the King during performances. The ballerina hadn’t come into prominence yet for two reasons. There was societal disapproval of female performers, and there was also the issue of clothing. Men got to wear tights, allowing for flexibility and movement, while women dancers were restricted to wearing large wigs and headdresses, shoes with heels, and heavy skirts—not the clothing from which the fine movements of ballet could be expressed.

In the early 1700’s, ballerinas became more prominent. Rebelling from traditional garb, they began to shorten their skirts and set aside their headdresses. Freed from restrictive clothing, they began to dance with more jumps and turns—doing the steps that only men had done up until that time.

In the world of early 1800’s ballet, Marie Taglioni often gets the credit for pioneering the technique of “*en pointe*,” the movement of rising up on toes. But why did en pointe become a significant dance technique? Minden reminds us that the 1800’s were the height of the Romantic Age, and the great ballets of that time were often about the tragic encounters between a mortal man and a supernatural female. The ballerina, garbed in flowing white costume, would float on the stage representing purity and virtue. The en pointe technique allowed the female to accentuate the movement upward, symbolizing a rising to the heavens and a connection to the divine.

“When she rises en pointe, she achieves an ethereal lightness, an otherworldly grace. She enters the realm of the spirit...Lincoln Kirstein called it “the speech of the inexpressible.”

Like the ballet dancer, when we give our passage gifts—the abilities that result from going through difficult events (passages) in our lives—we are en pointe. In those moments, we rise above the ordinary walk of our daily routines and choose to enter the threshold where our gifts and our wounds dance together, neither commanding the whole stage. We enter the world between the worlds, where our psyche is at attention, sensing both the danger of our old story and the freshness of possible transformation. Gifts are the connecting thread between the story of our past and the story of now.

For many of us, our daily lives can have an ordinary feel. Ordinary in the sense of being predictable—devoid of the awe and gratitude that comes when we see with fresh eyes the deep beauty in ordinary moments. When we feel the extraordinary contentment within the simple tasks we do to get through the day. Picking up a few sticks of wood to feed the fireplace. Noticing with distinct clarity the patterns in the leaves of the small plants growing at the edge of the driveway as we walk to our car. Slowly, regrettably, we become the routine and the routine begins to define how we see ourselves and the world around us.

The danger in slipping from being present in the beauty of the moment to just participating in a predictable routine is that we lose our imagination. Seeing beauty requires imagination. When we focus on the beauty in the moment, we enter a place of mystery where our thought processes shift from describing the facts of *what we are seeing as an observer* to being in the whole of the moment *as an inseparable part*. And, using a pattern of travel that seems to be built into us as humans, this slice of beauty calls us down a path of remembering the larger beauty of our lives and re-centers us with a surge of gratitude.

Gift giving can produce the same connections between beauty, imagination, and mystery. It jump-starts the movement away from the numbing that comes with a predictable life. It calls us to attention. When our distant memory recalls the suffering story that produced the gift—at the exact same moment the beauty in the gift is given and received—it reminds us of what we know is true in our bones: “Love-giving is not only possible as a result of our suffering, it is the only path out of our suffering.”

Gift giving invites us into en pointe moments that lift us up and reconnect us with the great mystery of our lives. After all, who can know the deeper “why” of their story? For instance, if a gift is simply the predictable, rationale result of a suffering story in our life, then why do similar suffering stories in people produce such different gifts? Why don’t all people who have been abandoned by a parent have the same gift from that experience in their lives? Why don’t all people who have been injured in a car accident have the same gift? Ralph Waldo Emerson² explains that the composition of each of our stories also contains within it a unique batch of abilities that, if we don’t fully engage with, no one else ever will.

“It seems as if the Deity dressed each soul which he sends into nature
in certain virtues and powers not communicable to other men, and
sending it to perform one more turn through the circle of beings, wrote
‘Not transferable’ and ‘Good for this trip only’ on these garments.”

The questions we have about “why,” which we can never fully answer, can cause us to become caught in a never-ending cycle of inquiry that diverts us from the grace-filled opportunity being presented to us—accepting and being grateful for the deep mystery inherent in the unfolding of our lives, and the gifts that result.

Gift giving gives voice to the story—without telling the story—while propelling each of us forward in service to others. As Kirstein tells us about ballet, being en pointe is “the speech of the inexpressible.” When we give one of our gifts, the often untold story that caused this gift to emerge may be resting in the background, but it does not disappear. The story remains with us, ever unfolding, offering fuel. The more we give the resulting gift, the more fully we live into the story, and the less the shadows and hurt within that old story undermine our ability to love. When I give one of my gifts to you, you may not know my story, but that does not take away from the generosity present in the giving of the gift. As Lewis Hyde says in *The Gift*³, “The spirit of the gift is kept alive by its constant donation.”

In the same way, each time the gift is given the suffering story resting in the background is witnessed and blessed. It makes sense, then, that the French word for blessing—*blessure*—translates to “bless the wound.” The actor Ricardo Montalban was struck by the courage of another actor, Christopher Reeve who, as a result of a spinal cord injury, became paralyzed from the neck down. Reeves, commenting on his life circumstances, said he “would pay two million dollars to feel pain again.” Montalban, learning of Reeves comment, said, “I have to think that pain is a blessing.”

Gift giving can reconnect us with spirit. In the “rising up” of gift-giving, we are offered moments of both grace and increased authority because we are acting out of our genuine authority—our gifts—rather than the positions of authority we may hold in our daily life or the accumulated wealth that surrounds us. I have had the experience many, many times of sitting with a person who, in medical language, is labeled as having a “severe and persistent mental illness.” A person who hears voices in their head, sometimes multiple voices, as they move through the activities of their day. Or a person who cycles between extreme despondence and manic highs. This is what I have witnessed: During my conversation with that person about his or her gifts, they often begin to change in ways that surprise both of us. Perhaps it is beginning to speak with one voice instead of many. Other times it is a slowing down or a speeding up of language. Still other times their physical presence begins to change. They may sit up straighter in a chair or slightly lean forward, sending the message of deeper engagement. The result of these changes, according to them, causes an ability to be more fully present in the moment.

I wondered for years why a conversation about gifts would cause this resulting shift. One day, at a weeklong retreat for youth and elders, I approached Malidoma Some⁴, initiated Elder of the Dagara in Burkina Faso, West Africa. I was curious if the wisdom tradition from his culture had an explanation for what I had witnessed so many times. He listened carefully as I described what I had observed, and he responded with an answer that, to this day, I have neither been able to dispute nor replace with a more coherent answer. He explained that, in the moments when we are talking about or giving our gifts, we exist as a pure connection between ourselves and spirit. The authority of our soul is awakened, alive, and present. There is a spiritual conduit created—like a pipeline or shaft, he said—that forms a grounding connection between. He further explained that the “clutter” in our lives in those gift giving moments—like the mental illness “symptoms” I was describing— cannot compete with the purity and power of this spiritual conduit. Like objects picked up and thrown from the outer rim of a hurricane, they are cast aside by sheer force.

Many spiritual traditions describe the moment— whether it is called prayer, centering, or meditation—when the ego, false-self, and other kinds of interior clutter relent and the person enters into a unitive state with spirit. Psychological models describe the entry into moments where the self seems to disappear while completing a task as a “state of flow.” There are similarities between the two veins of thinking—spiritual and psychological—that compliment the idea that gift-giving creates moments where the “I” of the person melts away and the person rises up and is propelled into a state of being that is both aligned and connected with a larger world—they are en pointe.

In both psychological and spiritual traditions, sustaining healthy motivation comes from an intrinsic desire rather than an extrinsic reward⁵. An intrinsic desire says, “I will give this gift, or do this task, because it produces joy in me and is part of my life’s path. It has a meaning which serves me.” This is a distinctly different from extrinsic motivation, “I will give this gift, or do this task, because of the ‘payback’ I will receive from someone other than me after I am done.” Because passage gifts originate within us as a result of difficult times in our lives, we give them primarily out of an intrinsic desire to reconnect with that story. Whether we are conscious of it or not in the moment, the call of the story is offering us further understanding and healing, helping us get unstuck so we can move a little further down our path. When we mistakenly give our gifts believing we are doing so only out of service to another person, we discard one of the most beautiful and essential ideas about gifts—the reciprocity within the gift means that both the giver and the receiver benefit. The receiver gets the gift that is given, and the giver receives the healing and a conscious awareness of the increased ability that results each time the gift is given.

Gifts remind us that the idea of “selflessness in service” does not mean the giver is exempt from benefit. Instead, it means that the intention behind the service is to give my gifts without the underlying yearning to have the focus be on me. It’s remembering that rising up en pointe does not include the click of the spotlight and the anxious moment waiting for the bright light to find you on the stage. So many times in my own life, I have helped another with the underlying hope that it would result in me being more accepted— seen for my gifts rather than the long, long list of faults that I catalogue regularly. Or, worse yet, believing that I knew the right path for that person and was entitled to reap the benefit of knowing I had saved them from themselves. Catching ourselves in acts of self-importance is one of the disguised blessings offered to us when we give our gifts. In *How Can I Help*⁶, Ram Dass says:

“I catch myself in self-importance ten times a day—check that, five—well maybe once. It’s appalling anyway. A little flashbulb goes off and I’m exposed...like Jimmy Olsen caught Superman changing clothes in the phone booth. Of course, whoever I’m with has probably been seeing all this self-importance in me for hours before I ever notice.”

I have a hunch I am not alone in speaking of these dark undercurrents. The good news, however, is that conscious gift giving offers the giver a recovery process. We may start giving our gifts hoping to draw attention to ourselves but, over time, we can develop the ability to give our gifts out of a pureness of heart—not needing to “polish them up” so the glitter falls on us as we give them.

For several years now, I have attended a monthly morning meeting with about forty leaders. Each month, I dutifully go to the local coffee shop and pick up enough coffee and juice for the group. Some people might see that task as an ordinary part of the chores necessary for a morning meeting. However, since one of my primary gifts is being welcoming, providing the coffee is much more than a simple chore to me. After several years of monthly meetings, I still consider it a privilege to take the extra time to get the coffee, pay for it, and set up the table where it is served. As small as that task may seem, compared to the important agenda of the group, to me it is a moment where I rise up, en pointe, and give the gift of welcoming. While I am doing the task I feel joyful, am totally focused on the process, and feel a sense of pleasure in having created an environment that welcomes everyone with drink. Because of a long-ago story of a time when I did not feel welcome in the world, a gift for welcoming emerged in me that exists to this day. And each time I choose to give the gift, that old story of unwelcoming loses a little more of its darkness.

In those moments when we rise up, above the ordinary walk of our daily routines, and choose to enter that threshold where our gifts and our wounds dance together, we connect the threads of our past with the story of now. The urgency for deciding to more fully reclaim the discovery and contribution of gifts, community wide, has its root in a beautiful possibility—en pointe community. We could, all of us, rise up above the fray of our daily lives and choose to cross the threshold where transforming our community, however we define that, hinges on the truth that all of us have gifts and all gifts are necessary if we are to move forward together and thrive. In those moments, our collective speech is no longer inexpressible. We are speaking with our gifts, and that language of love gives power to our words and deeds.

¹ Minden, Eliza. All About Pointe: The History of Pointe Shoes and Technique. 1998. Retrieved from <http://www.dancer.com/hist6.php>

² Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Representative Men. Kila: Kessinger Publishing, 2010

³ Hyde, Lewis. The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property. New York: Random House, 1983

⁴ <http://www.malidoma.com/cms/>

⁵ Lepper, Mark R and David Greene. The Hidden Costs of Reward: New perspectives on the psychology of human motivation. San Francisco: Wiley, 1978

⁶ Dass, Ram and Gorman, Paul. How Can I Help. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2001