

# On perfectionism, process and the impossibility of the perfect tree (2016)

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by Malcolm Manning

## **The conundrum**

Some years ago I had a crisis over the quality of my teaching. I started teaching in 1996. My classes were popular and I felt good about them. But after more than ten years, my teaching had changed, for the better I reasoned, and again I was feeling satisfied about them. But then looking back, my early classes seemed not so developed in comparison, despite all the praise I had got for them. Not so good. So what about these current classes? Were they not going to seem somehow less when looking back on them ten years further on in time? A depressing thought when viewed through the lens of what I freely confess used to be my strong tendency towards perfectionism.

Then I started to think of trees. I came up with a little mind experiment that profoundly changed my view and which I'd like to share.

## **The impossibility of the perfect tree**

When is a tree perfect? Thinking of a particular tree, when does it reach perfection? Is it perfect today? Would it be more perfect tomorrow, or next week or next year? Or yesterday, last week, last year? If I wanted to grow the perfect tree then how could that happen? I'd need to find the perfect seed and plant it in the perfect soil with the perfect amount of space around it. As it grew it would need the perfect weather, the perfect balance of seasons. And if I could arrange all that and grow the perfect tree, I'm still left with the question when does it truly reach perfection?

It's clearly absurd. When I think of a real tree, then it's always in process and always embedded in a context. The seeds grow where they land. Those that survive and grow do so in embedded in their environment. When I think of what makes a successful tree then the image that comes to mind is one that adapts to survive. It gets hit by lightning and a branch splits away, it keeps growing. Someone builds a house nearby, it keeps growing. Someone hangs a swing of it, it keeps growing. Lovers carve their initials in the bark, it keeps growing. A storm comes and knocks it over, it keeps growing. It's never perfect, it just ages. My mind is cast back to my favourite climbing trees in my childhood. They were often old trees. Survivor trees. One in particular was a hollow tree that I could hide in and climb up on the inside before emerging among the branches.

## **Perfectionism**

Reasoning it through like this helped me to face the absurdity of the idea of teaching the perfect class. And by extension having the perfect body. It was and will never be perfect, just incrementally older with each passing moment. Sometimes in better shape and sometimes not.

I remember back to discovering contact improvisation and the Feldenkrais Method back in November 1991. I'd suffered since my childhood with movement problems and pain in my body. I remember thinking back then after immersing myself in these two practices, that if I felt so much better in my skin and had dramatically less pain now, after just six months then surely after another six months I'd be perfect! Such was depth of the transformation that these two practices was effecting in myself, and such were my levels of hope and naivety. Time taught me differently.

## **Health and process**

Years later, I came across Moshe Feldenkrais' radical definition of health; the ability to recover. By this definition a healthy person is one who, when life deals them a blow as life does, is able to recover easily. For me it echoes the act of standing, the small dance of Steve Paxton, which is one of balancing freely on two feet. Standing as a dynamic of being in balance, righting oneself momentarily and tipping of balance again.

The art of the small dance for me is to find a place in myself from which I observe the action without directing it. Witnessing moments of alignment without trying to do them or hold onto them. That delicious sensation of arriving into balance and stillness alternating with that equally delicious sensation of falling out of balance and the unconscious engagement of the whole neuromuscular system in order to move back towards balance again. The pleasure is in the whole process rather than on any moments of "perfection".

## **Process and health**

Throughout my life I've had to deal with knocks and injuries that have come and gone, some serious and some less so. And I've had injuries creep up on one through years of less helpful habits, wear and tear one could say. I've developed and acquired strategies to work with and around them as I keep teaching and dancing, reframing these injuries and seeming setbacks as learning experiences. Opportunities for growth. I'm not wishing injury or pain on anyone but what I'm suggesting is that it's normal to experience them, nothing to be ashamed or alarmed about. By growing through them then we are offered possibilities to become more resourceful and wiser.

I've yet to meet an older dancer who doesn't have both stories of injury and places in themselves that they feel are vulnerable, regularly in pain or needing extra care and attention. It's normal. I recently heard pundits on the radio discussing how the career of a famous British footballer player might play out. They were both ex-players themselves and, though I'd never considered it, of course it was the same story; they described the success of a footballing career as a negotiation between maintaining skills and fitness while sustaining and recovering from the inevitable knocks and injuries. I think that's true for everyone.

## **Summing up**

So it's against this background that my teaching has developed since I started to nurture this view of humans, myself included, as processes. This image of the tree is always there to refresh the perception when needed to defuse any creeping perfectionism. I see my overall task in teaching is to support, stimulate and develop resources for growth. For me the skills of self-awareness and self-direction are fundamental to developing both our dancing and to maintaining our our health as we dance. Two sides of the same coin.

And I'm curious about the classes I'll teach in ten years, while very much enjoying the ones I'm teaching now!