

Eat, Sleep, Dance, Repeat
By
Daniel E. White October 27, 2025

I imagine Mom and Dad dancing, Dad light on his feet as he guided Mom around the floor. Mom, like Ginger Rogers once quipped about her dancing with Fred Astaire, did everything Dad did only backwards and in heels. I saw elegance and grace, two happy people, oblivious to the troubled world around them.

I have vague visual memories of seeing them dancing at home in my (and their) younger years. When I tried dancing, I thought myself rhythmically challenged. That only made me appreciate their skill and joy more.

Not surprising, then, that I have enjoyed so many forms of dance performance, from Savion Glover to Gene Kelly to Michael Flatley's Irish dancing. Naturally, it would follow that "A Chorus Line" would be a favorite Broadway musical. "All I want is the music and the mirror and the chance to dance for you;" Cassie's plaintive appeal to be cast in the play still moves me to wish that every one of us would have the chance to do what we do best and have that appreciated by others.

Perhaps also not surprising that I have been so taken by the celebrations for Dia De Los Muertos which traditionally involve dances with many themes. Anthropologist Stanley Brandes wrote "Dia is a time when the veil between the worlds is at its thinnest, and the dances performed at this time help to bridge the gap between the living and the dead." (Sarah Lee, Number Analytics, June 2025, online)

Danza de los Viejitos features dancers dressed as elderly people, symbolizing the return of the ancestor. The dancers in the Danza de la Muerte dance the cycle of Life and Death, and the Danza de los Listones involves brightly colored ribbons string around a central pole, symbolizing the connection between the living and the dead. (Lee, June 2025)

With the passing of each year, I need to imagine the connections the dancers represent. As we people of a certain age understand, more of our friends and acquaintances pass each year from one world to the next until we, too, cross the bar. We may understand that this is the deal. But it does not make the passings any less impactful for us.

In the last year, three people I have known well who wouldn't yet be wearing the clothing of the elderly and one person who was as close a professional friend and collaborator as I ever had have died before I would have hoped was their time to die. It helps to think that each is, in his or her own way, joining in the dancing on the other side.

So, the dances of Dia refresh memories about people in my life who have mattered and moved on and, in doing so, raise my spirits. A recent article in **The Christian Science Monitor** (9/1/25) reminded me that I am hardly alone in finding comfort in dance.

"Dance is a unifying thing," explained Mike Wamaya, who runs Kibera Ballet School in Nairobi, Kenya. "People dance at weddings. People dance at funerals. People dance when a child is born."

Wamaya danced professionally in Europe and the UK before returning to his homeland to become a missionary of dance. He noted that his students, from elementary through high school age, "learn repetition, [that] failing is OK, and if I fail today, tomorrow I'll pick it up again." He has created a dance that provided the dancers and the audiences with "a small way of showing the anger and the frustrations we have."

Where Wamaya lives and works is a city that endures periodic anti-government demonstrations such as the one in June 2025 that killed 65 people. That dance begins mournfully. The mournfulness gives way to the music swelling and becomes more hopeful. What's not to like about hope?

One of his long-term students will soon begin nursing school. "But she says she will not stop doing ballet which she values for how it transports her out of her ordinary life. 'On the dance floor, I am another person.'"

Consider how many cultures and sub-cultures have established traditional dances. Judy and I lived in one. Rarely did we encounter young women in Hawaii who had not learned hula, how to tell stories with their hands, expressions and bodies. Increasingly, young men have become involved as well. For me, one measure of our success in founding Island Pacific Academy was in cultivating a tradition of hula that engaged dancers young and old, male and female, who often performed at school functions.

How many European, African, Asian, and Latin American cultures have their own unique dances? Like the dances for Dia, they can carry diherent meanings, from celebration to preparation for war.

Those people dancing are connected, to each other, to a tradition, to ancestors and those who will come after and dance the same dance. What they are not doing is killing each other, literally or merely through cruelty.

I wish there was more dancing these days.

"For everything there is a season...a time to mourn and a time to dance..." Dia de los Muertos is an opportunity to lay aside our mourning for one day and dance to celebrate the time we did have with those who have moved on.

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