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## **Ballet Cults: Every Parent's Worry By Chuck Stewart, Ph.D. (1997, revised 2021) (6125 words)**

I belonged to a ballet cult. I know that seems to be a strange combination of words, but, in all honesty, that is what I participated in during my training years as a ballet dancer. Whether or not it was something inherent in me that allowed the tangle of lies and self-denial, or the manipulation by the cult, the experience created lasting impressions on my life. I have found that it significantly impacted all of us who went through the same experience.

In my career as a professional ballet dancer, I met many dancers who also came from cults. They told tales of intrigue, lies, psychological manipulation, social isolation, sometimes sexual abuse, and more. I found ballet and dance cults in every city I visited. I found a trail of damaged lives.

It was not until I retired from dance at age thirty-eight and attended college courses in psychology did I come to terms with my cultic experience. Since then, I have discussed this problem with many dancers and ex-dancers. So often, you can see the proverbial light bulb of recognition go off in the dancer's head when they hear the topic. By giving dancers the language of psychology and, in particular, the psychology of cults (known as "Totalism"), they can express the deep feelings that have eaten away at their souls. Once I broach the topic, a flood of stories and emotions come forth. I would guess many dancers have been through this experience and have had no way to express the anger, disappointments, fears, and nightmares that have haunted their lives.

### The Beginnings

It all began innocently when I was fifteen years old. I took ballet and tap lessons twice a week at a local dance studio for four years when I saw Romeo and Juliet's movie version with Rudolf Nureyev and Margo Fonteyn. I knew instinctively that was what I wanted to be. A local dance company held an audition. I was accepted on a full scholarship. What appealed to me about this dance company was that they were a serious group purporting to teach classical Russian ballet to become my large metropolitan city's ballet company.

The training was rigorous, with classes seven days a week taught by the director—a woman in her thirties. Besides the classes, rehearsals were held every weekend and most holidays. Most of us were teenagers, and I was the only boy. At least once a year, a performance was held on a large professional stage, and other male dancers were hired. In between, we often put on "showings" at the dance studio for sponsors and wealthy people. Some of the board members were prestigious movie industry people. We danced only classical ballet and sometimes the director would perform with us.

I ate it up. I liked the discipline. The girls in the company became my friends and surrogate family. I became central to running the company. Over the years, I became the male star who danced in every number and partnered with all the girls. I built props, stored costumes, obtained lighting, and helped schedule performances. Every free hour was dedicated to the dance company. I was helping build a future, or so I thought.

In the early years, we were really no different than any other local dance school hoping to grow into a regional or national dance company. All of us accepted the need to sacrifice time and money to make our dreams come true. The group's cultic aspects developed as I, and the other teenagers of the company, aged into our twenties.

### Setting the Stage

The director's own story was one of sacrifice that permeated the group's psyche. She came from a moderately wealthy family who spared no expense toward her ballet education. As a child, she was flown all over the United States to take private lessons from ballet stars. Her father spared no expense to indulge his daughter. Sometimes she would live with the star or meet with them backstage for private lessons. She never attended a ballet class with other students present. The implication of these stories was to establish that the director possessed unique knowledge that came at great expense and that we were the beneficiaries of her knowledge. Unfortunately, her parents lost most of their money. This misfortune was incorporated into the dance companies' retinue of stories to illustrate that the director's unique knowledge came at great expense, so much so that it destroyed her family.

### Sacred Science and Mystical Manipulation

Stories of unique knowledge obtained through great sacrifice are the hallmark of cult mentality. Researchers who specialize in cult psychology have identified these two dynamics as "Sacred Science" and "Mystical Manipulation." The director claimed her knowledge was absolute and that it was the one, true form of ballet. She repeatedly denigrated other forms of ballet and dismissed jazz and modern dance as vulgar. She further claimed that classical Russian ballet was the purest form of dance and transcended all other forms of art. Ballet, to her and her followers, was the ultimate art. Since what we were taught was "absolute," "pure," and "the ultimate art," it could not be challenged — it was sacred.

What did this do to us who were students? We parroted her statements and competed to show our allegiance. We created a mystique around the goals of making a ballet company that was "pure." The director told us that she never danced with a company because American companies engaged in "vulgar" dance forms, and she rejected them. Likewise, the company was to hold off presenting itself to critics and the world until we attained "perfection" in technique. Mystical Manipulations are evident when a group and its goals are placed ahead of and considered to be more important than anything else. The destruction of the director's family's fortune in the pursuit of the mystical goal of "perfect ballet" was "evidence" the director was "absolutely pure." We were held to the same standard, and we martyred ourselves, seeking perfection.

## Milieu Control

As we students aged into our twenties, the director changed the structure of her dance school. Instead of lessons being held in the afternoon to accommodate school, the lessons were changed to early morning and late afternoon. We were expected to attend both lessons every day. An attendance chart was kept assuring compliance. Those who could drive and had access to a car were expected to take the director grocery shopping and other errands each day after morning class. The time commitment made holding any decent job impossible. Most of us made do with part-time menial work, making just enough to pay the director for lessons and a little more. Most of us continued to live at home.

This control of our time extended into many areas of our lives. Cult psychology refers to this as “Milieu Control.” After the morning ballet class, the director expected us to sit at her feet and listen to her expound upon philosophy, religion (a form of Christianity), and her readings for approximately an hour. She said that she wanted us to share our thoughts, but, in reality, only younger students who were not in the inner circle of older dancers repeated comments made by the director. There was no sharing, just repetition of the group’s stories and goals with younger students trying to win recognition to enter the inner group.

## Loaded Language

The negative consequences of accepting “Sacred Science” are many. As the years went by, my parents implored me to take lessons with other teachers or to audition for other companies or go to New York and test the waters. I refused. My responses were short, terse statements such as, “She’s the best ballet teacher in the world,” “She’s the best choreographer in the world,” “I’m learning the highest art,” “Other forms of dance are vulgar,” and more. These phrases are known in Totalism as “Loaded Language.” These are highly reductive, easily memorized, and expressed, definitive-sounding phrases used to stop all discussion and thought. “Thought-stopping” lingo is one of the markings of cult activity. My parents were unable to break through my wall of denial.

## More Controls

I attended college and obtained a degree in physics. However, the director discouraged schooling, saying that education distracted us from being dedicated to ballet and the company. I believe I was exempt from the negativity surrounding education because I was a male. Even though I earned a high technical degree and could have gotten a high-paying job, I chose to stay with the company and worked menial jobs to attend both classes each day.

For years there was talk about setting up our own dance institute with living facilities. The director began negotiations with a city in the mid-West to have us become their dance company and all live together in one house. There was also talk about us “reverse defecting” to the Soviet Union because they “appreciated” serious ballet more than Americans. I believe that if we had moved in together, the cultic nature of the company would have been more evident to parents and outsiders.

Milieu Control attempts to manage individual's inner communication by controlling what the person sees, hears, writes, or reads. Besides the director's belief that education was unnecessary and that we should read what she provided us, our company attempted to control individual autonomy by isolating dancers from family and outside friends. We were encouraged to only associate with the dance company members and "tolerate" our families. I was told directly by the director to ignore my parents' concerns and leave life decisions up to her. By limiting outside knowledge and experiences, the dance company members became dependent upon the other members for identity.

There were many restrictions placed upon us. We could not take lessons from other teachers. If we did and it was ever found out, we would be kicked out of the company. Similarly, the director was clear that she did not want anyone in the company to date romantically, get pregnant, and we were expected to conform to gender roles. She held celibacy as the highest moral value and showed disgust when touching us in class. She often stated that she "tolerated" the touch of a man while being partnered and hated their "sweaty arms."

Several mechanisms are used to coerce members to become tightly bound to the group. One is mental and physical exhaustion. Ballet, by its very nature, is an excruciatingly painful metamorphosis of the human body. When you tie that in with severe caloric reduction, fatigue is a common problem with ballet dancers. In an exhausted state, we were less likely to challenge the director and the cult's irrationalities.

### Cult of Confession

Guilt and humiliation are powerful tools of cults. Dancers in our company were obsessed with being fat and ugly. Each day, we were forced to be weighed in front of the director, and the results were recorded on a chart maintained by one of the dancers of the inner circle. The director would loudly proclaim if she thought you were fat. Bulimia was rampant in our company, and two dancers were hospitalized for anorexia.

It was common for dancers to declare guilt over eating a muffin three or so days earlier or for some other "infraction" of the group. "Confession" is one of the other major criteria identifying a cult. Company members were encouraged to befriend each other and report transgressions to the director, who would create much turmoil over the issue. Eventually, the transgressor would make a public confession. Instead of the Director offering solace for vulnerabilities, she manipulated confessions as a tool of exploitation. Confessions in cults do not eliminate personal secrets but rather increase and intensify them and make it virtually impossible to maintain a balance between humility and self-worth.

The company was rife with secrets and backstabbing. For example, one of the women dancers who lived in the director's home became involved with a man. She did not tell the director nor engage in behaviors that would reveal the situation. She married the man yet returned to the director's home, as usual, on her wedding night and subsequent nights. She was too afraid to tell the director the truth and maintained a "single" lifestyle for several months until the truth came out, and the woman was thrown out. She disobeyed the rule of postponing romantic involvement until later in life.

Of course, as a teacher of dance, the director made comments about our dancing. She gave only negative assessments. Her basic mantra was for us to "stay on the hip." We

feared her criticism. This obsession for “pure” ballet influenced us in very negative ways. Often, as a group, we would see a performance by a major ballet company touring our city. When the show was over, we would wait for the director’s assessment. Whatever she declared; we would enthusiastically say the same thing. We had no opinions of our own and were mostly judgmental of all other dancers and dance companies. I found I could not enjoy watching dance for fear that I would have an opinion and feeling contrary to the director’s.

### Demand for Purity

The world became black and white. The director’s vision for the company and her moral system represented the true path. Everything else was wrong. The director and company held a Totalist vision of truth and was “enlightened.” Even irrational things were used as evidence of the director’s unique abilities. There was a time when the director announced to everyone that she found herself separating her garbage by color before wrapping it for disposal. Instead of seeing this odd or disturbing, she told us to accept this as further evidence of her higher level of artistic abilities. She shared this story often to the group.

If a member of the company left, they were never to return and became “nothingness.” They were guilty of transgression. This is known by cult psychology as “Dispensing of Existence.” The fear of becoming nothingness held many in the group regardless of the emotional pain. One gifted dancer did leave the company, marry a man, have a child, and return a few years later. There was much commotion about the situation, but the dancer became an example of someone who returned to the path of enlightenment. Her presence helped reinforce the righteousness and capacity of the director to “forgive.”

### The Beginning of the End

At age twenty-four, I had been a loyal follower of the company for nine years. The director stated in press releases that it took nine years to make a professional dancer, and here it was nine years later, and the company was no closer to becoming a reality. Rehearsals were held continuously, but no indication of upcoming performances was told to us. The classes became very large, with thirty people attending. This was caused by the director allowing children and adults with only a few months of dance training to attend our company classes. The classes were becoming very routine and monotonous. Often, we spent twenty- to thirty-minutes just doing grand plié. Dance routines were four to eight counts long and not challenging. The director refused to seek art grants and other legitimate forms of sponsorship for the company. We were going nowhere.

I became very angry and tried to injure myself. I was depressed and suicidal. My mother encouraged me to seek therapy. It was there that I began to make inroads into acknowledging and accepting my depressed feelings and thoughts. I found that I hated the situation, resented wasting so many years, and felt stupid for being duped by the director.

Often it was asked why we trusted the director? She had never been a professional dancer and had no experience as a dance company director. Once I began to take lessons

from many other teachers in my city and New York, I discovered that the director's knowledge of ballet was minimal and that she was totally inept and incapable of training finished artists or building a ballet company. I would not have known this unless I witnessed other dancers and teachers or read books on the topic. Yet, the nature of a cult is to control information to keep its members blind to reality. The cult members must be willing partners in the deception, and we blindly trusted the director.

### Reasons for my Cultic Predisposition and the Consequences

I've examined my life to understand what it was in me that allowed me to become a cult member. In my case, I narrowed the cause to homophobia and my predisposition toward being an "idealist." I knew at an early age that I was gay. I told my parent in a letter when I was ten that I was gay but quickly learned that it was a secret no one was to know. I felt alone and buried myself in work. I loved to dance and escalated that to a level to make myself physically exhausted. I obtained a physics degree to keep my mind occupied and built custom cars in my parent's garage to stay isolated from everyone else. Philosophically, I was an ardent believer in Ayn Rand and her extreme black and white moral system. I owned every book and paper she ever wrote. I was trying to find self-worth by over-achieving. I sought perfect order through absolutes. I engaged in martyr behavior, and cults provide the ideal environment for martyrs.

What exactly does it mean to be a martyr? It is when someone engages in sacrificial behaviors to obtain outside approval. In my case, I attended more classes than any other student. I devoted more and more of my time to the company, such that it kept me impoverished. In my mind, the greater my financial distress became, the more I felt worthy. I was held up to the group as a role model of sacrifice that others were expected to emulate.

Staying with the ballet cult until I was almost twenty-five-years-old had its consequences. When I left, there was a showdown between the director and me. The showdown was emotionally devastating, with many of the dancers (my "friends") screaming at me. One of the other dancers left with me, and for about six months, we rented a dance studio to conduct our own private classes. Finally, we began to venture out to other dance studios and teachers in our city and New York. It was an eye-opening experience. I was no longer the "best" dancer. The French used in class was much more extensive than what I had learned, and it was confusing. Dance routines were commonly twenty-four to thirty-six counts long, and I found them difficult to pick up quickly. I was devastated to find that I was so ill-equipped to be a professional dancer. It took almost two years of hard work to catch up to a level of working professional and, more importantly, I rediscovered the joy of dance again. Dance was fun, beautiful, inspiring, athletic, and more— things lost within the cult.

However, by then, I was twenty-seven years old. It was glaringly apparent that I was too old at dance auditions to be considered a new hire. Only a few paying jobs came my way. My only saving grace was that I was a solid and tall partner that taller ballerinas sought.

I also experienced continual nightmares of the ballet cult and director. I could hear them yelling at me. I felt like a failure and more. A few years later, I decided to return to the cult for one last lesson. I hoped seeing them would reduce my nightmares. I

felt great anxiety. It was cleared with the director that I could attend a class. As I walked in through the door, the first words out of her mouth were, “You’ve gained weight.” My weight was exactly the same as it had been for fifteen years. I thought how typical and petty for her to make this statement. So, I decided to blast the class. Nothing had changed in her lessons with the endless plié, grand rond de jambe, and simplistic routines. I added in beats and other things to spice up the lesson. In the center, while doing extensions, I lifted my leg as far up as I could, way above parallel with the floor. Of course, the director came over and scolded me for “being off the hip.” I ignored her. Later, I found out that I intimidated most of the dancers in the class, particularly the male students. My dancing had improved so much being away from the cult. The experience was empowering, and my nightmares were reduced. However, even now, thirty years since leaving the cult, I occasionally have dreams and nightmares about the experience. It will never go away.

## HOW TO PROTECT YOUR CHILD

Ballet and dance cults exist everywhere. Some are very small, and some are large and well organized. They can be found in any neighborhood. They prey on innocent children, give false hope, provide inadequate and sometimes dangerous dance training, and ultimately damage cult members’ psyche for a lifetime. The core of this article examined how ballet cults form and manipulate their members resulting in long-term negative consequences. I now want to write to parents about protecting their child from cultic groups and becoming aware of unprofessional, illegal, and immoral behaviors sometimes engaged in by dance teachers and dance companies. A dance teacher or company does not have to be a full-blown cult to damage your child.

Every child loves to dance. Dance is fun, invigorating, and, under the right circumstances, transcendental. The rarefied world of classical ballet and professional dance requires years of dedication, hard and painful work, and discipline. After students take three- to five-years of dance lessons and enter their teens, they come to a juncture. Many forces pull them away from dance— school, athletics, religion, family, socializing, and more. Most casual dancers drop their training. Those teenagers who choose to continue with dance are usually very hardworking, able to dedicate substantial portions of their time away from the family in pursuit of becoming a professional and are “idealistic.” These teenagers possess exactly the personality traits that match the personality traits psychologists have identified in persons most susceptible to cultic conversion. Parents whose children aspire to professional ballet must be extra alert about cults.

There are several prominent academic cult researchers. Some are listed at the end of this article. In general, they agree on the major criteria defining a cult. For our purposes, a cult is a group that meets all or most of these criteria. In some cases, it is a matter of degree since all organizations and governments engage in similar types of control. Further, some actions are so blatantly unprofessional, illegal, or immoral that even if the group is not a cult, parents should consider removing their child from the teacher or group.

- Milieu Control—involves the control of information from without the group and within the individual. The purpose of a teacher is to convey information. A dance teacher has a responsibility to teach about dance and to help students discover the kind of dancers they can be. That may seem obvious, but many dance teachers restrict what students learn about dance and emotionally tie them up with impossible goals.
- Unprofessional behavior includes:
  - restricting students from taking classes from other teachers;
  - threatening to kick a student out of a school because of taking lessons from other teachers;
  - restricting what types of dance the student studies;
  - restricting students from interacting with dancers from other companies and styles; and
  - restricting what a student reads or watches about dance.
- A professional teacher encourages his or her students to:
  - take a wide range of dance classes from a wide range of teachers;
  - associate with dancers from many different styles;
  - read many books on the topic; and
  - watch all forms of dance.
- Only when students are exposed to the wide world of dance will they find their love and expression and be faithful to the kind of dancer they can become—which may not be what they initially believed or trained for.
- Mystical Manipulation - is designed to create a mystique around the group and its goals, and that “truth” transcends reality and the individual.
- Teachers who engage in unprofessional behaviors often:
  - state that “art” requires great sacrifice including family, friends, and, eventually, the self;
  - state that ballet (or, fill-in-the-blank) is the “highest” art, and there is nothing nobler; and
  - encourage students to view themselves as “keepers of the ‘truth’.”
- I believe this is the primary tool used by unprofessional teachers and cults to “turn” unsuspecting children into cult members. In the adult model of cult psychology, adults recognize a discrepancy between themselves and how they want to be (in a metaphysical sense) who are most susceptible to becoming cult members. Children do not take up dance to join a cult seeking “truth,” but rather are attracted to the fun, musically, and physicality of the activity. It is unprofessional teachers and cults that malign such an innocent pursuit into emotional torture. Professional teachers may talk about the beauty of the art and more but never cross the line into making ballet or dance the end-all of existence that requires the sacrifice of family, friends, and self. Parents need to observe classes and listen to teacher’s comments and explanations to be aware when a teacher crosses the line in Totalism.



- Demand of Purity— divides the world into two camps: the pure and the impure. The underlying assumption is that “absolute purity” is attainable and anything done to anyone to pursue this purity is “moral.” Since absolute purity is unattainable, persons who chase after it only develop shame and guilt. Unprofessional teachers and cults manipulate the shame and guilt by offering “forgiveness.” Thus, the group becomes a haven from the outside, impure world.
- Some of the unique issues in dance related to purity include body image and sex. Dance, and in particular, ballet, hold a body image that is virtually impossible for any human to attain. Dancers often believe they are “fat and ugly.” Unprofessional teachers and cults reinforce the unattainable body image as “pure” thereby placing students into a vicious cycle of shame and guilt related to eating and purging. Professional teachers will encourage students to eat healthily and teach acceptance of their natural bodies.
- Professional teachers will:
  - not allow students to wrap any part of their bodies with plastic wrap or devices to produce sweat;
  - discourage unhealthy weight control methods such as bulimia and anorexia; and
  - never force students to weigh themselves publicly or keep a chart of their weights.
- Sex is another area that unprofessional teachers and cults often try to control their students. Being heterosexual or homosexual or bisexual, monogamous or polygamous or celibate is not related to dance. The idea that a woman cannot marry or have children and still have a dance career is a throwback to the movie “Red Shoes.” Many dancers marry and/or have children and still dance professionally. Unprofessional teachers or cults will make the sexual orientation, marriage status, children status, or religious affiliation of a dancer into a moral issue.
- Parents need to observe classes and social settings at the dance company to assure teachers, and the company behaves professionally.
- Cult of Confession— is closely related to the Demand for Purity. Sharing feelings of guilt in the standard therapy, legal, or religious sense can be beneficial. Here, confession helps the person better accept his or her emotional state and opens the door for exploring new avenues of behaviors. Confession in the hands of a Totalist becomes a means of exploitation. Confession in a cult is designed to obtain obedience to the group to increase and intensify personal secrets rather than eliminating them.
- Parents need to observe classes to see if students are ever required to confess publicly about some supposed wrongdoing (as related to the Demand for Purity

- discussed above). Also, ask your child if he or she has ever had to confess to the teacher. The teacher is not a therapist and should not be engaging in therapy.
- The “Sacred Science” - implies that there is “absolute truth” that is beyond questioning.
  - Unprofessional dance teachers and cults often will claim:
    - they are the “best” teacher;
    - their form of ballet is the “best;”
    - no one else knows as much about dance;
    - all other forms of dance are vulgar; and,
    - all other teachers are impure.
  - There is no “best” form of dance or dance instruction. There are many excellent dance teachers. Professional teachers will not demean other teachers.
  - Parents are encouraged to engage their children in conversation to ascertain if such black and white, absolutist comments are being made in the dance class.
  - Loading the Language— are clichés that compress ideas into definitive-sounding phrases that are easily memorized and expressed for the purpose to “terminate” thought. Totalist language judges unmercifully and is intensely divisive.
  - Are we expecting parents to be experts on ballet? No. We ask parents to observe classes and engage in conversation with their children to see what beliefs and language are being told to them. Here is an example from my own experience. The dance cult I belonged used the term “off the hip” to criticize other dancers and teachers. This was irrational for two reasons: (1) other forms of ballet allow dancers to go “off the hip” to achieve high extensions, and (2) the very dance performances that enthralled us the most included high extensions (which required being “off the hip”). Thus, being “off the hip” was loaded language designed to stop criticism of my own dance training and to denigrate others.
  - When a parent encounters a short expression from his or her child that effectively dismisses the criticism, we encourage you to explore with the child if this is loaded language. If so, the parent may want to bring this to the teacher’s attention and/or remove the child from the teacher and setting.
  - Doctrine Over Person—replaces human experience with ideology. Past events can be rewritten, altered, and ignored to conform to ideological myths. In my own cultic experience, the director of the company explained away the fact that she never danced professionally by claiming other dance companies engaged in vulgar forms of ballet that were beneath her. This is a rationalization because the director was not a very good dancer— even after having years of costly, private lessons. Her past was explained away to conform to the Mystical Manipulations of the troupe.

- If parents become aware their child’s dance teacher has lied or rationalized away his or her education or past, we strongly suggest that you remove the child from the care of that teacher. Similarly, if you catch your child lying about his or her dance training or experiences to impress others, and this is in conjunction with some of the other criteria discussed in this article, then be concerned that your child may be part of a cult. Professional teachers are honest and encourage students also to be honest.
- Dispensing of Existence— means the group decides who is a worthy person and who is not. The consequences of such a belief are that members of the cult live in fear of being ejected from the group. Conforming to the cult’s beliefs requires members to discard any information contrary to the group as worthless or lies.
- In concert with Milieu of Control, unprofessional dance teachers and cults will dismiss other forms of dance and other dance teachers as being worthless or vulgar since it is contrary to the cult’s mythology of being the “best.” Members who leave the cult become “nothingness.” i.e., they are not even worthy enough to talk about. New members of the cult are expected to quickly pick up the group’s lingo and values or face being expelled.
- Parents need to listen to their children to see if they are fearful of leaving their dance teacher or dance company. There should never be fear.
- Parents need to be closely involved in their children’s dance education. Look for extreme comments and beliefs. Look to see if your child is engaging in unhealthy eating or is injuring him- or herself. These are not related to dance but rather Totalist beliefs that could lead to your child’s disastrous experience.

As final guidance, there are dance schools and dance companies that are fronts for recognized religious cults. That is not the focus of this article. However, I would recommend you remove your child from any dance school or company where you discover that the teachers, directors, or funding are coming from a recognized cult. Once your child becomes an adult, it may be too late to save him or her from the clutches of the cult.

### Closing Thoughts

When I was thirty years old, I was at the peak of my dance career. I danced for a Los Angeles based company that was an extension of Paramount Pictures, guested with a few other companies around the United States, and taught pas de deux classes in Los Angeles and New York. I was known as an excellent partner, a great turner, but a lousy jumper. I experienced continued ankle pain and was examined by a hospital specializing in sports injuries and served the Los Angeles Ballet and Los Angeles Rams football team. It was determined that I fractured my ankle from the twisting action of turns (I consistently performed nine or more pirouettes in perfect control). A cast was put on. Six

weeks later, it was examined, found that the bone had not knitted, and a second cast put on. Six more weeks later, the cast came off, and I was healed. I asked the physician if I really needed a cast. He looked me in the eye and asked me if I danced while the cast was on. I answered, “yes.” In my mind, I had to keep teaching classes and was scheduled to perform at a benefit just a few weeks later. He said, “No, you could have worn a bandage, but I know you dancers, you’re crazy and just won’t stop.” Instead of feeling embarrassed, I felt proud that I was committed more to my “art” than any professional football player who makes millions of dollars a year.

It wasn’t until I returned to college for my Ph.D. and took psychology classes did, I understand that my attitude was martyr behavior—a legacy of my youth and cultic experience. Just think of the implications of this. Five years after leaving the cult, I was still engaging in martyr behavior. And it would take another ten years and obtaining a college education before I fully understood what I had gone through. Is it any wonder that ballet cults’ situation is beyond the awareness of most students and parents? It is so subtle and sinister. I am now acutely tuned to identifying martyr behavior. Martyr behavior is always dysfunctional and a significant criterion for identifying cults.

Which brings me to the director of the company. Do I blame her for what happened in the cult? Yes. Do I believe she did it intentionally? No. I believe she was a victim just as much as the rest of us. Something in her childhood— whether it was the excessive money, private lessons, emotionally distant mother, loss of family fortune, her closeted lesbianism, or whatever— drove her to express her insecurities through a cult. I do hold her responsible for not separating her private life and struggles from the business of creating a dance company and the private lives of children.

## OFFER TO THE READER

The story above is the personal recollections of my experiences in a ballet cult. I’ve discovered many dancers who have been through similar experiences all over the country. I am collecting similar stories to be published as an exposé on ballet and dance cults. Would you like to share your story? [Just contact me using this form](#). Together, we can make the world a safer and better place.

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