

Feature

What is your life dance?

By Jo-Anne Henderson

Jo-Anne Henderson shares the importance of dance in her life and her work as an occupational therapist.

Using dance to promote health and well-being on all levels is my "superpower" tool as an occupational therapist. Dance is my passion and I am building the foundations of my business, Life Dance, in Dunedin.

Personal expression through dance can provide an insightful mirror that reflects our daily lives. It can create an illuminating platform or stage (forgive the pun!), inspiring a closer look at how we dance our lives and perhaps, more so, how we would prefer to dance it. A dance teacher repeatedly used to say to me, you need only to take small steps. Yes, it was true within the dance class and also in my life... I got the message finally!

My experience both as a dancer and as a dance teacher have shown me many benefits. Dance can help us to remember what we value, what feels meaningful and purposeful, and what makes our heart sing. It motivates us to take small steps towards finding a new supportive balance, which nurtures transformation and change in our everyday lives. Through dance we may discover new things about ourselves. We may find we dance our lives to a new melody and find a new rhythm with new combinations, new moves and new directions.

Wu Tao (The Dancing Way) is your life dance

Following my lifelong passion for dance, I trained in Wu Tao (The Dancing Way) and became a certified practitioner in 2011. Wu Tao was founded by Michelle Locke, a professional ballet dancer in Western Australia who later trained in oriental medicine. It is likened to tai chi dance and has its foundations in traditional Chinese medicine, with the belief that chi flows through meridian channels bringing physical, mental and spiritual health. As a practitioner, I am trained in the foundations of traditional Chinese medicine.

There are five dances that embody the energies and philosophies of the five-element supportive cycle: air, water, wood, fire and earth. Each of the dances has its own quality. They are adaptable and work with a pair of meridian pathways, gently stimulating energy flow. As an example, the water dance works with the meridians which govern kidney and bladder function, and they also correlate to supporting the nervous system, bones, marrow, teeth and the reproductive system. This dance has a huge restorative function in building energy reserves and strength. On a mental health level, it helps reflection and identification of old core beliefs that are no longer supportive of health. The water dance also helps participants move through fears or barriers that have prevented them moving forward in certain aspects of their life.

The water dance characterises the nurture of life balance for development and growth. It helps us to see our balance of rest, work, play, leisure and nourishment physically, mentally, cognitively and spiritually for well-being. We can ask the following questions: what is my life balance and is it healthful? In what way do I need to replenish my energy levels? Where does energy naturally want to flow in my life? What aspects feel hard and what comes with ease?

The water dance as per the teachings of traditional Chinese medicine and feedback from clients is particularly beneficial for posture, back problems (including lower back pain), fatigue, nervous conditions, anxiety, restlessness, and urinary and reproductive problems.

Although I have separated and described the water dance, all of the dances are interrelated and serve a positive role relating to a presenting problem. These are just some of the benefits from one of the Wu Tao dances.

Occupational therapy supports life dancing

I find that Wu Tao (The Dancing Way) and occupational therapy are a wonderful complement for each other and so I have created Life Dance workbooks for people who want to further explore this area. The workbooks support the transfer and integration of insights from the dance classes into everyday life. They can be used independently or with support and include:



Jo-Anne Henderson (pictured) says dance is her "superpower" tool

- Occupational self-analysis to analyse occupational patterns and how day-to-day occupations contribute to or compromise health and well-being.
- The Kawa Model (River Model) to look at the overall picture of a person's life energy flow as a river. In this context, you can identify whether symbolic elements in the river support healthy flow or impede flow. For example, the driftwood may be symbolic of character and skills, the rocks may be symbolic of an injury and the river walls symbolic of family, friends and leisure.
- Appreciative Inquiry helps make the shift from the problem into health by asking questions about empowering moments that have brought positive life flow. We can ask about what occupations and environments have brought vitality, energy and well-being in the past.
- Support with lifestyle redesign to creating balanced routines from selected meaningful and purposeful activities that promote energy flow, health and well-being.
- Journaling, if this appeals to the person

The water dance: An appreciative inquiry with occupational self-analysis

The following questions can be asked when exploring lifestyle redesign possibilities:

- In what circumstances in my life have I felt the most nurtured, supported and encouraged?
- Which activities have nourished me the most in my life?
- What are the most energising experiences or activities in my life?
- What are my most relaxing experiences or activities in my life?
- What do I value the most in my life?
- Which activities hold the most meaning in my life?
- Which activities help me feel the most balanced in my health on all levels physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually?
- Do I have any barriers to receiving what I need?
- What has helped me move through these barriers in the past?

The answers to these questions support lifestyle redesign and a new supportive life dance. This process has also been very useful in my life, particularly in times of change and in setting up a new business. It enabled self-nurture through growth and development, and a focus on what nourishes me through the process. It is empowering to know that we have all of the answers to these questions and the healthy life-giving possibilities are very inviting!!

If you would like more information on Wu Tao (The Dancing Way), email 2lifedance@gmail.com.

Jo-Anne Henderson shares the importance of dance in her life and her work as an occupational therapist.

This article has also been published on the Wu Tao website.