

## XIII

### Looking in the Mirror

“Look at your right foot: it’s all twisted.”

Sure enough, reflected in the enormous floor-to-ceiling mirror of the dance studio we were in, was my crooked foot for all the world to see. And here I’d thought my partner and I had struck the perfect, flawless pose.

“Your arm is too stiff; your knees are bent, your shoulders are hunched...” and so the assault continued; the image in my head having borne only a scant resemblance to the image everyone else could see. The gifted inner me unfairly chained to this outer klutz.

In the journey from neophyte to “expert” we all progress through numerous stages – self-consciousness, caution, obsession, justification, rationalization, intellectualization, blame, arrogance – until we inevitably consider ourselves ready for the final stage: perfect Tango show dancers.

By the time I reached this stage, I'd stuffed my closet to capacity with Tango-wear. My shoe racks were overflowing with Tango shoes. I owned every Tango CD ever burned and studied with every Tango show star to stop in town long enough to give a class.

I was saturated with technique, inundated with styles, and adorning my steps to the max. It was, in fact, when I believed there was no inner work left to do – or was avoiding it – that I became obsessed with “how I look”, and turned my attention outward again.

In this stage, I stole furtive glances in those enormous mirrors as I danced by, under the pretence of correcting my flaws, but secretly admiring my own grace, poise, or creativity, and silently criticizing my partner's evident need for more classes.

There was much to admire: the flirty-ness of my skirt, the felinity of my stride, the position of my foot. I experimented with hair styles, hem lengths, and heel heights. Sometimes, I didn't even see my partner, except as something blocking an admiring view of myself. I sneaked peaks at my progress towards perfection, conveniently overlooking any flaws that threatened the inner image of myself.

Until the teacher – or a clearly more advanced partner – would point them out.

Even then, I continued to avoid looking at my flaws directly, or I became obsessed and frozen by them. In either case, I remained a prisoner to this incomplete inner image, unable or unwilling to move beyond this or that detail either because I refused to see it or was consumed by it.

I would dismiss an instructor's general comments in the class as pertaining to others, since I could not – or would not – see them in myself. As a result, my evolution into a truly good dancer came to a grinding halt. All the technique and classes in the world did not address the real problem.

What I could not see was that as long as I placed my attention on the outward image while ignoring the inner connection, I was only seeing a partial picture. As long as my partner's image in the mirror was no more to me than an obstacle to a view of myself, the picture was not complete. After all this time, I was once again “dancing by myself”.

Then one day, for whatever number of infinite reasons, I finally heard my teacher's or partner's comments and instead of thinking “that isn't me”,

I thought “what if that were me?”. The once locked and blockaded door was now ajar.

With that simple shift in attitude – from “not me” to “what if” - I finally found the courage to look in the mirror and see the complete picture: the fabulous posture with the bent knees; the graceful movements with the floppy feet. I saw my complete self: both my beauty and my flaws which, now that they were visible, could be corrected.

I saw it all, embraced the reality of who, what, and where I was. And while it wasn't perfect, neither was it all that bad.

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In Life

It is a daily ritual, the look in the mirror. Upon rising; upon retiring. I wash my face, I brush my teeth. I apply make-up or fix my hair, or adjust my skirt, or match my outfit.

On my daily journey through life, I can check out my reflection in any surface that offers one, and note how many people are doing the same.

But what am I looking at? And just what do I see? Am I admiring the glint of my sunglasses and my newly-bleached teeth? Or am I steeling myself for a glimpse of a flaw someone's words brought to my consciousness?

In my progress through those numerous stages of Tango, I avoided the big picture as avidly as everyone else did. The reason I could not do this or the other step was because it had not been lead properly. Or the lead was too hard. Or my partner too short. Or the floor was too sticky, my heels too high. An infinite number of reasons that had nothing to do with me, and for which I was therefore not responsible.

It was this attitude that permeated my entire life. An attitude that placed me on an unchanging plateau that stretched infinitely into the horizon. A trap of my own making.

I recall avoiding my own gaze for many, many years. It was somehow creepy, and this look-alike stranger returning my stare made me feel very uncomfortable. There was an aversion, no doubt fueled by the fear of discovering something grotesque, to looking into those eyes. Of catching myself in a lie; or seeing the hypocrite; of discovering that part of myself for which I needed to accept responsibility.

The part that was responsible for my own misery.

Because I knew, subconsciously perhaps, that if and when I ever did accept responsibility for myself, I'd have to do something about it, or I would never know peace. I would never be able to dance.

Even knowing that this was what I had to do for anything in my life to change, it took many years to find the courage to do so. And although the fear of looking outweighs anything we might actually see by a thousand fold, I cannot lie. When I finally did summon the courage to face myself for the first time, it was horrible. It was a kick in the stomach that took my breath away. It was painful and shocking and humbling and humiliating. And for an infinitesimal instant which nevertheless seemed like an eternity, all I could see were the flaws. They occupied the entire universe and suffocated me with their enormity. Like tearing off a band-aid, my entire consciousness was reduced to the infinite pain on one inch of skin.

And then there was the miracle: the watering of the eyes subsided and I realized that I was intact, that I was pretty much who I always thought I was – and more – and that I had just gained true, genuine control for the first time in my life.

I no longer had to wonder “why does this happen to me”, but could now ask “how can I change this”.

The plateau had been traversed. I could now become a better dancer.

The Lesson

*Embracing my true self, exactly as it existed, warts and all, required something I was never previously able to do: accept responsibility. To look at whatever awful or hateful thing I saw in myself and recognize it as part of who I am would never have been possible in my unbalanced state. With my passive/female energy in a weakened state, I was unable to contemplate, observe, and witness without judgment, or of accepting responsibility for who I was. Without understanding my active/male energy, I was racing around in avoidance of that responsibility.*

*As long as I dismissed my “flaws” as genetic, unfair; beyond my control; ethnic; sexist; cosmic; karmic; or hormonal, I would never be able to touch them or transform myself. By allowing my gaze to skip over my true self whenever I looked in the mirror, the illusion would rule me, boundless and inevitable. My flaws would always be a wall I would continue to bump into as long as I refused to see them.*

*In retrospect, I cannot deny that despite all the benefits of having looked in the mirror, there were times when, like Neo in The Matrix, I'd wished I'd taken the blue pill and continued in ignorant bliss, rather than having taken the red one and seeing the truth. The truth I saw was intolerance and judgment; laziness and impatience, that I was opinionated and didn't listen – all qualities I despised and readily recognized in others. Witnessing them was excruciating, and almost awful enough to make me start running again.*

*Almost.*

*The idealized image I held of myself was shattered with just one little, honest glance. But that brief peak at the true image that remained held far more promise than my fantasy ever did.*

*What I did not yet see under it all, however, was fear. Fear is the most supreme obstacle we must overcome. It is the basis of shame, timidity, and cowardice. It is why we assign blame and why we hate. Fear is the fuel of deception, and why we lie, cheat, and reject anything new and ridicule anything different. It is the enemy of creativity, joy, and spontaneity. And why, no matter how horrendous and torturous our lives are, we prefer to stay in the depths of misery rather than face the unknown.*

*In my own experience, it took a very long time to recognize fear in myself. My fear was of displeasing others, and it*

*was so great that I preferred to endure unhappiness rather than be the cause of it in others. The images of abandonment, fury, and resentment I imagined I would inflict were enough to stifle whatever urge I had to change, even though change was the only healthy and logical choice for me to make.*

*It was not until I finally saw – and acknowledged – that fear, that was I able to begin any sort of true, profound transformation. It took many, many sessions of looking in that mirror to finally see this sneaky trait in myself.*

*This does not mean the fear is gone, but that in recognizing it I am able to work around it. Nor does it make change easier, but it makes change possible. As long as the reason to stay put was this fear, I would never be able to embrace change. What I discovered, of course, was that for the most part, the actual reactions of others to my changes never measured up to the fiery drama of my imagination.*

*As each ugly and frightful piece of myself fell into place, I also recognized that they were but tiny details of the greater “me”. By owning them, was I able to put them into perspective, devise a plan, and achieve the changes I desired.*

*The path to personal growth is never-ending, and the process, once begun, is irreversible. Even so, it takes a lot of discipline and courage to continue looking in that mirror. When I become complacent and comfortable in*

*whatever zone I've entered, I invariably run into another glass ceiling of my own making, another wall within myself I did not realize I had erected. It is only by accepting responsibility for that obstacle that I can begin the process of overcoming it. And every wall I bring down reveals ever greater vistas and grander panoramas of life's beauty.*

*In the final paradox, I almost relish finding these obstacles in myself, since recognizing them, embracing them, and eventually overcoming them brings me ever closer to that balance and harmony we all seek. In accepting my own flaws and the responsibility for my own mistakes, my happiness is no longer at the mercy of someone else. True freedom of self requires personal responsibility, which is the challenge. But the rewards thus far would make me choose the red pill every time.*

