

Naomi Raisman

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: NSU University School, Davie, FL

Educator: Ann Marie Sellers

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Twists and Turns

Dance is a huge part of my life. In the frenetic whirling of a complicated dance routine, I find calm. The twists, turns, and dips of a practiced choreography fade into the background, leaving me with just the thrill of physical performance. The rhythm of the music lets me express my feelings through movement.

In addition to the physical enjoyment I derive from it, dancing helps me feel connected to my Cuban heritage, and in particular my grandmother and great-grandmother, who came to America as refugees from the Castro regime and who encouraged me to dance as a child. My great-grandmother always loved music, and in particular loved singing. When I was very young, she would sing to me the same folk songs she had sung to my father and his siblings, and to my grandmother before them, and which in turn had been sung to her as a baby. When she sang, she clapped along to the beat, and encouraged everyone else to join in. It was in this backdrop-- a noisy party in my aunt's living room, with my parents, cousins, grandmother, and great-grandmother in attendance, all clapping loudly to the rhythm of a half-remembered song from their respective childhoods-- that I first began to dance.

As I grew older, my family encouraged me to keep dancing. My grandmother in particular was enthusiastic about my dancing, and it became our special connection: she taught my older cousin how to cook and my little brother how to sew, but we always bonded over dancing. When she herself grew up in Cuba, her father worked selling fruit on the Malecón, a waterfront promenade in Havana. On the weekends, she accompanied him to the tiny stand at which he worked, and amongst the hustle and bustle of pre-revolution Cuba she danced alone, to the rhythm of the crashing waves. She continued to dance throughout her life, both during her childhood in Cuba and later in America as an adult, but by the time I knew her she suffered from terrible arthritis in her knees, and could not move well enough to dance any more. Her body had given out, but her passion endured, and she loved watching me dance. She called me her "bailarina," her dancer, and whenever I saw her I would dance for her, to whatever was playing on the TV or sometimes to nothing at all.

Inspired by my grandmother and great-grandmother, I have continued to dance throughout my life, first in lower school as an after-school activity and later through lessons with a professional ballroom dancer. Through my formal training, I quickly learned that my favorite style of dance was salsa, a mix of Latin musical genres derived mainly from Cuban dance music. Salsa features rapid motions of the hands, hips, and feet, and, put simply, is tremendous fun. Dancing quickly around my partner, going around and around an intricate circle, always careful to never get tangled up-- salsa tests not just my own coordination and speed, but also my communication, confidence, and discipline.

In addition to its challenging, quick moves and fast rhythms, salsa appeals to me because of its connection to my heritage. When I dance to my favorite salsa songs, Celia Cruz's "La Vida es un Carnaval," Marc Anthony's "Vivir Mi Vida," and Sergio Mendes' "Magalenha," the Spanish lyrics bring me back to dancing along to my great-grandmother's Cuban folk songs as a child. Now, instead of my aunt's living room, I dance in a ballroom, and instead of just my closest family, I dance in front of judges and an audience. What hasn't changed, and never will, is the special role dancing plays in my life, as both a creative outlet and an anchor for my Cuban identity. As I progress to the next phase of my life and move away from my family, dance will help me always keep them with me.