

Since the age of seven, I have been madly and passionately in love with two pieces of metal and the shoes that go with them. My first pair of tap shoes transformed my entire world. They gave me a special kind of perfect magic that I had only glimpsed in fairy tales. Dancing filled a large void in my impressionable mind. It created a beautiful world where I could express, dream, and wonder to my heart's content.

The night I received my first pair of tan, leather tap shoes was one of the most magical of my young life. Much to my parents' dismay, I proudly paraded around my house trying my new shoes on every available surface. Our ceramic tile, wood floors, and carpet were all fair game. My face lit up, and I yelled for my parents to look at me and admire my new skill. My parents applauded politely, although clearly my feet were just moving around with no apparent rhythm.

My first pair of shoes lasted through dances where I was a cowboy and a flapper. Ribbons and feathers adorned almost every costume. Ridiculous props seemed to be a necessity for each dance, and my mom put my hair in French braids because "it was cute."

As I grew out of my first pair of my shoes, my dancing took a different turn. The cutesy costumes and ribbons morphed into straightened ponytails and costumes that were hand-made masterpieces.

Somewhere along the way, my mind-set changed with the dancing. No longer did I parade around the house proclaiming my new skill to seek my parents' reaffirmation. Instead, closed off in my room, I refined my technique. Dance became a beautiful escape from the harsh realities of the world around me. It became a way to express my intense, sweeping feelings. During my teenage years as my emotions raged like tidal waves, dance would soothe me. It was so utterly simple, but dance freed my soul in a way nothing has ever been able to match. No longer was there pressure to fit into a mold or be anything except myself. It was a haven where I could be ensconced in the expression of art. It became a world where nothing could hurt me. When reality would disappoint me, dance would be my only savior.

Now I realize the striking importance of the role dance plays for me. To be able to express myself through such an art form completely changed my outlook on my life and the world. It freed my soul and completed my spirit. Dance was my outlet to express the emotions that ran incredibly deep inside me.

Today, when I'm nearing the end of my competition stint, I'm not really sure what to feel. I'm not sure how I'm going to continue without the only thing that has ever allowed me to be me, simply and plainly without pretense. When my proverbial stage finally goes dark, I'm not really sure how to face the world. Twenty years from now, I'll probably be alone in some dark old dance studio with the music blaring and dancing around until I feel like I'm going to pass out. I'll lie down on the wood floor and my lungs will protest to the point where I can't breathe anymore, and I'll love every second. My heart will never forget my young dreams because it will never outgrow that fairy tale magic that dance has instilled within it.

I know that I can't leave dance forever because it completes me in such a way that nothing ever has. When I attend the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota next year, dance will find a way to weave itself into my life, and gladly I will keep it there as long as it lets me whether through teaching (like I've done for the last five years) or on some kind of competitive team. My heart will never be whole without it.