

What Irish dancing taught me about life

The other afternoon I found myself teaching our boys a few Irish dance steps in the kitchen. We were all laughing, and no one was really taking the lesson seriously. Still, we had a wonderful time bouncing around and pretending we all knew how to do our threes.

I found myself thinking that all those years of Irish step dancing I did gave me more than the ability to hold my own in a ceili or try to teach my children a few jig steps. It gave me some life lessons I still hang onto today.



Keep smiling. You might forget how to do a dance step or trip on the stage. One of your fellow dancers might make a mistake and throw off a whole segment of the dance. As long as you bounce around with energy and apparent joy and a cheerful smile, most people in the audience won't know—and you know what? At the end of the dance, neither will you.



The dance must go on. If your hat or cape or shoe falls off, don't stop to fix it. How you overcome those little obstacles shows what kind of performer you are. And the dance doesn't stop for anything or anyone. You just put your best foot forward and keep going.



You're not always the star. Except for your parents, the people in the audience aren't there to see you. They're there to tap their feet to the music, see a group of dancers dancing together, and have a good time. Learning that often in life each of us is a cog in something bigger than ourselves, that we are important but especially as a member of a team, is important. It's humbling, reassuring, and true in real life.



That said...even within a team of talented Irish dancers, everyone has different talents. Some dancers are good at guiding the younger dancers. Some excel at a solo slip jig. Some can remember exactly how a complicated group dance goes. Even when you're all dressed alike and dancing the same steps, you can see those individual differences and appreciate what each dancer brings to the group.



Practicing is not always fun, but it's important. Doing the same steps over and over again in a church basement? Blah. Throwing yourself into the Sweets of May or the Walls of Limerick? Exhilarating. Dancing on a stage at the Irish Festival when your cousin pulls then-Mayor William Donald Schaeffer onto the stage for a group dance? Thrilling. But you can't have one without the other. Sometimes we have to eat our vegetables before we can have dessert.



That's my baby sister Treasa on my right.

Dancing makes people happy. This is true for audiences, whose eyes light up as they watch the speed and intricate steps the dancers do, who listen to the synchronized pounding of the gillies on the stage, who marvel at the way the dancers swing and swirl around one another. But it's also true of the dancers themselves. Once that Irish music starts playing and you start moving, it's hard to be anything but excited.



You could learn these lessons many ways, but there's something about how Irish dancing blends art and math and music and interpersonal relationships and culture and fun. Have a happy St. Patrick's Day!

Thank you to my amazing mother for looking through many, many albums to find these photos for me.