

# THE DANCE

## Christine Brooks Cote

*What if we embraced the idea that there are no distinctions between the past, present, and future; ascent and decline; from and towards; dance and the still point?*

I'M NOT MUCH OF A DANCER. I THINK YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO COMFORTABLY DWELL IN your body to be a dancer, and I'm the type who tends to be more comfortable in my head—thinking, researching, analyzing. Yoga helps move me toward balance, but not so much that I want to break out on the dance floor—at least not yet. So, it's little wonder that if "dance" were presented to me in a word association game, I likely wouldn't immediately think of the act of dancing—twirling, gliding, gyrating, swaying. Rather, the names of three people would come to mind, probably in this order: [Isadora Duncan](#), [T. S. Eliot](#), and [Ram Dass](#).

Born in 1877 in San Francisco, **Isadora Duncan's** parents divorced when she was an infant after her father was caught engaging in illegal banking activities. Without financial support, her mother struggled to raise Isadora and her three older siblings. It's impossible to know whether or not these difficulties, which occurred when Isadora was in her very early formative years, contributed to her becoming a person with a remarkable free spirit, but it is clear that Isadora grew up to be someone who refused to abide by many of the customs and mores of the time. Her revolutionary spirit showed itself early when she chose to quit school at the age of ten because she found it too constricting. As an adult, Isadora was known to be a feminist, a bisexual, an atheist, and a communist. She rejected marriage and bore her children out of wedlock.

Isadora began dancing at a very young age, as did her sister and two brothers. They gave dance lessons to neighborhood children to help support the family. When Isadora approached adulthood, she traveled to Chicago and then New York where she began studying dance. Very quickly, however, she became disenchanted with the unnatural and rigid qualities of ballet and other formal dance



Isadora Duncan

techniques. Her free spirit led her to pursue dance performance and teaching in ways that fit her dedication to what she called "natural movement." She believed that movement flows from emotion and that dance is a sacred art because, like all art forms, dance serves to link the inner and outer worlds. Her ideas revolutionized dance, which is why she is known as the "Mother of Modern Dance."

I read Isadora Duncan's autobiography, "[My Life](#)," when I was young (in high school or college, can't remember exactly). I was enthralled by her passionate adherence to questioning tradition and living life deliberately as a free spirit. She was a person who tasted life deeply and expressed herself intensely. She knew instinctively that the outer and inner life are connected, and believed her dancing to be a revelation of her spirit. Many years later, it's interesting to look again at the passages that I marked when I read her book—did she help form me or did I find her to be a kindred spirit:

*Then, for the hundredth time, I made a firm decision that hereafter I would give my entire life to Art, which though a hard task-master, is a hundred per cent more grateful than human beings.*

*I believe that in each life there is a spiritual line, an upward curve, and all that adheres to and strengthens this line is our real life — the rest is but as chaff falling from us as our souls progress. Such a spiritual line is my Art.*

Next, **T. S. Eliot**.

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

This is one of many well-known passages from [Four Quartets](#)—a collection of four poems by Eliot. This one happens to be from "Burnt Norton."

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T. S. Eliot

One of the major themes explored in *Four Quartets* is time. Always with us, not often given appropriate consideration, people spend a lot of energy relating to time; in fact, I think most of us, at some point, feel that time is running our life—the daily schedule, the weekly schedule, the flip of the calendar. We think of time as being cleanly divided into past, present, and future; minutes, hours, and days. But when we stand back and give it appropriate consideration, we see that time is a conundrum: it is not as forward-moving, fixed, and measured as we believe it to be. Don't we often marvel at how quickly some days pass but others do not? Haven't we all had the experience of time standing still? Is the past really separate from the present, given that we often relive the past in the present? What if we embraced the idea that there are no distinctions between the past, present, and future; ascent and decline; from and towards; dance and the still point?

Dance and the still point are two sides of the same coin. One cannot exist without the other, so dwelling on their oppositeness may send us in the wrong direction. The same is true of all dualities, some of which Eliot names: ascent and decline; from and towards. What if we instead dwell on their connectedness? The challenge then is: Can we hold our past and future together in the present moment? Can we carry both grief and joy at the same time? Can we sustain darkness and light as one thing? If we break down barriers imposed by duality, we will reach the inner world, the still point, a place of timelessness. Dance—the dance of life—moves us in this direction.

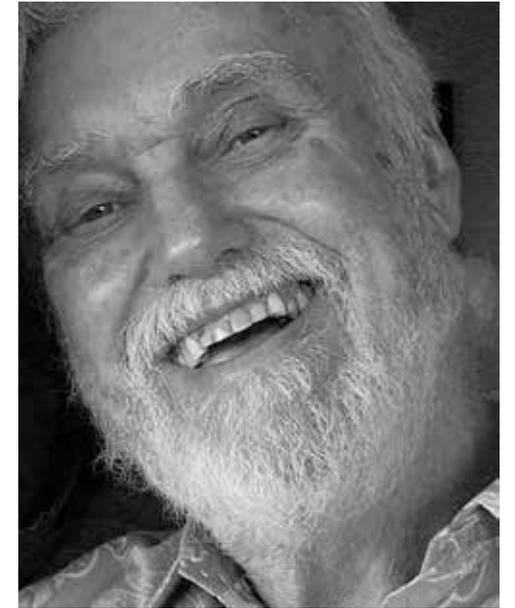
[Listen to T. S. Eliot read \*Four Quartets\*.](#)

Finally, **Ram Dass**, author of, among many other books, [Be Here Now](#) and [The Only Dance There Is](#); famous for joining Timothy Leary to research the therapeutic effects of hallucinogenic drugs while on the faculty at Harvard University. After being dismissed from Harvard, Richard Alpert (the birth name of Ram Dass) continued his experiments with drugs such as LSD and psilocybin, moving ever closer to their possible spiritual and mystical benefits. After a few years, Alpert went to India, met Bhagavan Das and Neem Karoli Baba, and eventually became Ram Dass, which means “servant of God.” He has been one of the most influential spiritual teachers and authors of the last fifty years.

For Ram Dass, life is a dance; we spin, turn, glide, and shimmy our way through the ups and downs, joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains of everyday living. Just as we think of time as something outside of ourselves that is fixed and rigid, we regard many other aspects of life in this way too. Very important to Ram Dass's message, we develop very fixed and rigid ideas about who we are,

what we do, what we can become. Ram Dass teaches that the dance of life is the journey of paying attention, dropping the sharp distinctions, opening our hearts and minds, and experiencing all as one. That's the dance, and we're all doing it together, like an [English country dance](#). Once we learn to drop the distinctions, the differences, the contradictions, the rigid ways of thinking—in other words, live deliberately, live intentionally—we arrive at an awareness and understanding that we are all one and the same. It's all one and the same.

*What I'm saying is that this evening is part of my work on myself because I realize that the only thing you have to offer another human being, ever, is your own state of being. . . . Whether you're cooking food or doing therapy or being a student or being a lover, you are only doing your own being, you're only manifesting how evolved a consciousness you are. That's what you're doing with another human being. That's the only dance there is!*



Ram Dass

*What man has continually done, he's taken each little tool he's been given and used it in order to enhance the power of his own separate entitiness. In fact there is a whole other level where you become part of the process of it all, because you decide your own separate entitiness is merely part of a running-off process. You no longer identify yourself as a separate entity. . . . You become more and more like a river. When a river floats down the stream it doesn't say, I must follow the laws of gravity or today I think I'll float down the stream. There is no overlay of self-consciousness.*

[Watch this documentary featuring Ram Dass talking with Timothy Leary before Leary's death.](#)

Isadora Duncan believed that dance—like all art forms—serves as a link between the inner and outer worlds by showing us there is more to life than what meets the eye. T. S. Eliot used dance as a metaphor for the inner world, a place of timelessness and nonduality. And Ram Dass taught that life is a dance, the only dance there is! Dancers and non-dancers—ponder these ideas as you enjoy this issue. Perhaps you'll conclude:

*“Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.” ❖*