



I don't like to dance

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"Come on, let's dance. We are all friends here, and nobody knows how to dance anyway!"

Indeed, we were all close friends. People were laughing, talking, and genuinely enjoying themselves. Nobody was judging anyone. If ever there was a safe place to relax and have fun, this was it.

Without even thinking, I replied, "I don't like dancing."

The conversation moved on, but later that night, my own answer stared back at me.

I don't like dancing.

A question surfaced from somewhere deep inside: Do I really not like dancing? Or have I simply learned not to like it? The last question bothered me more than I expected. Why?

From as early as I can remember, people noticed that I was different. Long before I had the words to describe myself, others had already formed opinions about how I should walk, laugh, talk, and behave - about what I should and shouldn't enjoy. I grew up having to hear comments about

things I did not consciously think about. Some comments were intentionally hurtful, though others were probably innocent observations. But children rarely stop to analyze intentions. They simply learn.

One of my earliest memories is from when I was about six years old. I was sitting with my closest friends. Someone cracked a joke and I laughed.

It was only a laugh, but someone asked, "Why do you laugh like that?"

I still remember that moment. It was *not* the cruelest thing anyone had ever said to me, but this one fell differently. I looked around and noticed the discomfort that followed it. I saw the embarrassment on the face of a friend whose acceptance mattered to me. I felt as though something personal to me had suddenly become visible.

One thing that stayed with me was the realization that being myself could make other people uncomfortable. This realization had come during a moment when I was happy, which is the strange thing about these experiences. They

rarely happen when you are already hurting. They happen when you are laughing. When you are excited. When you are feeling safe and your guard is down. Sadly, they come from the people closest to you.

The lesson became hard to ignore: being noticed is risky. So my mind began solving a problem. How do you stay safe?

The answer was simple: Disappear. Do not attract attention. Do not stand out. Do not give people a reason to comment. I started slowly editing myself. It wasn't a conscious decision, but a survival strategy.

If I wanted to dance, I stayed seated. If I wanted to run, I walked. If I wanted to express excitement, I toned it down.

The adjustments were small, but they accumulated year after year until they became automatic. The strategy worked. Life became easier. There were fewer comments, less scrutiny, and less embarrassment. I survived. And survival became a habit.

Today, I am at a stage in my life where I feel fortunate in many ways. I have meaningful work. I contribute to society. I teach, and I mentor. I spend my days trying to make a positive difference in the lives of others, and I have a sense of purpose that genuinely satisfies me. Many of the battles that once occupied my mind have been won.

Yet, sometimes I find myself troubled by questions that seem surprisingly small. Not about achievement, success, or career, but questions like: What do I actually enjoy? What music do I genuinely like? What would I do if nobody was watching?

Do I really dislike dancing? Or did I learn

that liking it came with consequences?

After overcoming so many challenges, it feels strange that I still struggle to answer such simple questions.

Safe spaces can cause hurt. People often describe safe spaces as places of healing. For me, they feel like mirrors. And mirrors can hurt.

Once the threat is gone, the question changes. "How do I stay safe?" becomes, "Who am I when I no longer need to protect myself?"

Many times, I am not sure. To know my real self, I need to pull away the armour that has protected me for so long. But stripping it away is painful. Even worse is the fear of what I might find underneath. Like peeling an onion, I worry that if I remove all the layers, nothing will be left.

Did I ever get the time to form a real self, or was I just too preoccupied protecting myself from the very beginning?

And if the mirror hurts, whom do you blame? The people in the safe space? No, they are kind. Your younger self? That seems unfair. That child was simply trying to survive. It is saddening to realize just how effective my survival strategy became. It protected me so well that even now I can no longer easily separate what I truly like from what I learned to avoid.

Survival is the quiet distance that develops between a person and their own instincts. I now understand that some dislikes were never really dislikes at all, but small adjustments made in the name of safety. In the interest of being safe, I lost touch with the best parts of myself.

Today, the simplest question is the hardest one to answer: What would I have loved to do if I hadn't been taught not to?