

Barefoot

A Surfer's View of the Universe

Andrew Pacholyk MS, L.Ac

author of *Lead Us To A Place ~ your spiritual
journey through life's season*

Forward by Surfing Legend Joey Cabell

Barefoot: A Surfer's View of the Universe

by Andrew Pacholyk MS L.Ac

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About the Author

Andrew Pacholyk is an American dancer/choreographer, director, and producer. His transition to a second career with a Masters and Doctoral degree as a licensed acupuncturist and healer seemed like an unlikely path. But his love for surfing and the sea was the catalyst that helped with his transformation.

Through life lessons of courage, conviction, and dedication, learned through the joys of surfing, Andrew's ability to see beyond the horizon gave him the curiosity to seek out more.

Andrew is the author of *Lead Us To A Place ~ your spiritual journey through life's seasons*, and the International Best Selling author of *The Crystal Light Crystal Therapy Course* and his popular *Chakracology Course*.

As an educator, he has taught and certified over 100,000 students worldwide in these specific healing techniques. His articles on spirituality, health, and wellness have been published all over the world in 30 languages.

Peacefulmind.com is the culmination of his 25 years in the metaphysical and healing arena.

Surfing has been his life-long love and passion taking him all over the world in search of the perfect wave.

Foreword by Joey Cabell

Ho'omaika'i 'ana and congratulations to Andrew for writing a well-rounded and real tale about the life of a surfer and his view of the Universe.

As a surfer who has traveled around the world, discovered the incredible joys the ocean offers, and found peace in endless summers, I have relived these amazing recollections through this mesmerizing memoir.

Andrew conveys in this exciting book, the most important elements I personally live by in surfing that is dedication, commitment, and earning respect. Being prepared and ready for what's ahead is not only the mantra of a surfer, but are important life lessons we should embrace.

You can feel Andrew's sheer commitment to the ocean. From his exceptional descriptions of the sea and breathtaking sunsets, to how caring, clean-up, and community play a big role in how we love and respect our planet. The self-realizations and discoveries Andrew find on his journey are both awkward and wonderful as he captures just how every one of us stumbles through the processes of life until we find that road to self-confidence, self-love, and self-awareness.

This book is an ode to the love and art of surfing. It elevates the manner and style in which surfing is intertwined with life. Lessons learned in the soup can be taken anywhere. I have personally applied these lessons to my business practices, my relationship, and my overall outlook on life. Surfing has given me the various traits everyone can learn from and that is being faithful, honest, and committed to everything you love.

Mahalo, Joey

Joey Cabell is named one of the top twenty-five surfers whose innovative surfing style changed the sport. ~ **Surfer Magazine**

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who *dare to go beyond* the comfort of their front door and make their *dreams a reality*. For anyone who's looked up at the stars and wondered where their place in life lies... for anyone who has looked out over the horizon and wondered what's waiting for them over that line... or for anyone who's ever felt like there is something more waiting for them around the corner... I dedicate this journey to you!

Find your inner confidence and step forward. Discover the passion inside *your* heart. Use your *fortitude and raw guts*. This is what makes you ~ you.

We are all on a pilgrimage. We start from the birth of our unconscious beginnings. We gather experiences throughout our life span, no matter how short or how long that span may run and are finally reunified with the Divine.

As we travel the path, we are no longer polarized between unconsciousness and conscious, but if we pay attention, we may realize we've stepped forward with a better sense of who we've become.

This realization is surely illumination. In the process, we can fully gain a conscious understanding of who we are and if we're lucky, how we've become a more integral part of that Divine.

Take that journey. Take that chance. Remember, it's always best if you follow your heart.

Steen A Suarez
(Big Steena)

24 November 1949 – 30 June 2016

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The sea is a collective group of microorganisms that all work in conjunction with one another. We are all interconnected.

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~ **to Lori Helfand**, like each celestial body that occupies space, we orbit on our trajectory passing the furthest reaches not ever sensing one another. Yet, sometimes we move passed those who influence our every gesture or leave a lasting impression in a short amount of time. Your brief presence in my life changed me forever. This is for you.

~ **to Frank Alkyer**, one of the coolest, laid-back cats I know. Although our time working together was brief, we shared lasting adventures on the other side of the world. You and Lori will always be in my heart.

Live for the Sun

“Surf’s up!

*The board glides ‘cross the water’s edge with elegance and grace...
between the perfect wave that rolls us up and glides us down its face.*

It shows how we should roll with life, just taking on each ride.

*As resistance drags and pulls us down and slows the flow of ebb and
tide.*

*From dawn patrol with breaks of light that slowly stretch ‘cross
morning seas,*

*to late day sun that glows with joy and peace and all the hope we
need.*

*This sun it offers us great life and symbolizes conscious thought,
reminding us as day is done, the precious lessons we’ve been taught.*

*I’m grateful every day for what I’ve learned, perched out here on my
board,*

For these are gifts I’ll take with me, as trophies and a just reward.

~ Andrew Pacholyk MS L.Ac

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Barefoot

I am the “every man.” Every man (woman or child) that has ever been drawn to the sea and surf.

I represent the collective soul seeker who has been called to the sea. The person that finds solace at the water’s edge.

I am a surfer.

I am not a world-class champion nor a kook, but a person who has mastered his board and has enjoyed countless days dangling his feet in the water, searching for the perfect wave.

I never set out to do anything more than be able to stand up on my plank and catch a wave.

What I ended up experiencing was how a small microcosm *of humankind has become regarded as the epitome of the Universe.*

I have engaged in some of my most life-altering moments, barefoot. I am most connected to the earth and sea through the hundreds of sensors at the bottom of my shoeless feet. When I’m barefoot, I am grounded, centered, and feel my best sense of balance. I am connected to my board. I’m more aware of who I am, when I indelibly dig my feet into the sand.

‘Barefoot’ is my journey through life on the waves. It is a cathartic and self-realizing journey of how surfing changed my life and helped me find self-esteem, courage, and self-confidence. These values I have learned in the “soup” have helped me in relationships, business, and being comfortable in my own skin.

This is a story for anyone who has searched for answers in their life. With *Barefoot* you will discover a connection to your own struggles and a “board buddy” to help you navigate your way across uncharted waters.

Surf’s up!

Introduction

Dawn Patrol

The pungent taste of salt christened my tongue as I hit the sea running. I always liked to get this blessing over with so that my body could adapt more quickly. As I dove into the frigid water, I could feel the back of my neck react to the brisk attack. My back zip, although covering me from neck to ankle, did not seem to keep me from feeling the Arctic blast that consumed my soul in that moment. “God, I hate cold water,” I thought. “What we do for love.”

I dashed a little further through the soup and then hopped on my longboard for the appropriate paddle out. I loved to pushout past the wave breaks to a point in the sea, that I knew was “the spot.”

My cousin Bill was close behind me, paddling out like a stealth fighter, seen but not heard. I looked back over my shoulder to see if he was with me. He reached up and gave me a Shaka, so I knew he was alright. This is where we stood dawn patrol.

The sun was just starting to stretch and exert himself over the Eastern horizon. His fingers slowly creeping over each wave awakening the lazy seals that were lying languid on the rocks along the Northern face of the jagged mount protruding from the sea.

On shore you could see colonies of seagulls, perched in the sand facing its morning Master as he rose with grandeur from horizon’s lip. They meditatively consumed the rays of sun that exalted them before flying onward and upward to address their daily tasks.

We stopped paddling and straddled the rails of our boards. We turned the round nose of the sticks to the sun and simply took it all in. Each minute of the rising sun seemed to introduce itself to a new part of the ocean, just waiting for its power to blend with its own. I loved drinking in this morning energy. I could sense the grit of salty air, the warmth of the sun on my chilled face, and the promise of a day that offered a new hope.

As my body became more and more acclimated to the water’s brisk temperature, I could equally feel the sun’s power, recharging my battery like no other source. I could not wait to get out here. These moments of peace

seemed to allow all other obstacles in life to melt away. Life's stressors were burned off by the warmth and commanding rise of his Majesty, the Sun. At one point, Bill and I simultaneously looked at each other. That was the sign. Time to find the perfect barrel.

We paddled further Southeast to catch the roll of the waves as they would rise and fall with a reverence you would not often see.

It was a good day to be on the water.

The remnants of some wicked gales the night before, now seemed to move the waves in a more uniformed and respectful approach towards the white sand, waiting to receive them.

Bill caught the first wave. He looked over his shoulder and found what he was looking for. He rolled with the water to its lip and popped up just in time to embrace his first morning venture. He glided down over its welcoming edge and took command as if it had his name on it. He simply rode it all the way into shore. A perfect 10. Showoff. I've always adored my cousin. He was a month older than I and a few minutes shorter. His strong upper body was fit for surfing while his ingrained Pennsylvania accent, wild, chestnut brown hair, and constant joking always made him the life of any party.

It was my turn. Time to prove myself. My cousin was expecting nothing less. Unfortunately, I was not expecting anything close. I waited (and waited) for what I was hoping was the wave with my name on it. Growing impatient, I decided to charge a roll. I looked with intent at my target, popped up, and went over the edge. I could feel the wall looming behind me, chasing me down the mount. I inched my bare feet closer to the nose of the board, all the time, trying to keep my balance between nature's fury and my own mind, naturally seeming to work against me.

From my right came another wave, melding into my own, forcing a double up. This humpback wave suddenly caught me off balance, tossing me from my board. As I took a header into the water, I could feel the leash tighten around my ankle as I seemed to thrash and roll under the double waves. While I was fighting for a breath, my board was tombstoning on the surface and all I could think about in that moment was, "what was Bill thinking?"

As I popped up to the surface, my first words to myself were, “smooth move, dude!” I looked up and saw Bill on shore. He was probably wondering, “when is it time for pancakes?”

I cleared the abrasive salt and stinging ice water from my eyes. My cousin, is now standing on the belly of his board, making an eating gesture. I knew it. “Man, we just got here. You hit one solid wave and you’re ready to chow down,” I thought. Bill was just a natural. I was not even sure he adored surfing the way I did, but it just came so easy to him. I suspected he was just bored and was ready to move on to the next task.

I needed to get my rhythm. Become one with the sea. Connect to Mother nature. I always seemed to have to work twice as hard at something to feel good about myself and my abilities. Of course, my surf buddy ends up being someone who exuded natural confidence, approached everything in life as if there was never an obstacle, and almost never seemed to have a care in the world. “Oh, lucky me.”

As I bobbed up and down in the swells, I pulled my board back to me and slid on. I could see Bill applying a lap of wax to his board top, so I knew he was ready to hit the waves again.

We spent the better half of the morning trading off on rolls, finding our stride, and pacing the waves.

It truly was a great day to be on the water.

The swells were perfect, the sun was shining, and we had the whole beach to ourselves. Not counting the seals.

It was the perfect day.

Chapter 1

My Inner Beach Bum

I was a happy kid. I grew up in the landlocked farmlands of central New York. Isolated from the raging realities of the world outside the borders of the barbed wire fences that kept the cows from getting out and the culture from getting in. Although I was not an only child, I often played alone in the cornfields of summer or wandered through the hedgerows that lined the outskirts of the farm. During the brutal winters, when the snow drifts would cover the front door of our house and the pine trees lining the borders of our yard were heavy and laden with snow, I would crawl underneath them on my belly in my snow suit, pretending I was discovering new worlds hidden beneath.

My brother, Steven, who was two years younger than I, was more into his own creative expression. He was patient, reserved, and observant. He would sit for hours sketching or painting with my father while I would spend hours daydreaming and pretending that I was traveling on glorious adventures around the Universe.

Looking back, I seemed to use my imagination to create even more boundaries of self-reliance. The boundaries would only allow things in life that made me happy. I enjoyed keeping myself busy with my creative thoughts. Growing up on a farm afforded me isolation and gave me an amazing opportunity at living life amongst nature. This also showed me just how much I was in my own little world.

Everything my eyes could see was crafted by my father. He was a hardworking, learn-by-doing kind of guy, who never called a plumber or a roofer or an electrician. If something was broken, he would fix it. If he didn't quite know how, he would teach himself.

My father met my mother working in a beachside resort called The Breakers. Dad was a doorman and my mom a waitress who eventually transferred to working the elevators of this stunning hotel. In fact, dad opened the front door of the hotel, the first day my mom arrived off the train. Their beautiful love story was set along the beaches and intercoastal environment of one of America's richest and most decadent cities in the tropical paradise that is still Palm Beach, Florida.

My mom was a slender chestnut-haired beauty, with brains to match. She was the tough disciplinarian who always taught us that we could do anything we put our minds to, as long as there was passion behind it. She was not only a practical problem solver, but she looked great in a swimsuit as well. My mom idolized Ester Williams, the great Hollywood swimming star. Mom was an ace swimmer and loved the water as a fish loved the sea.

My father looked like he just stepped out of a 1960s beach movie. He was a 6-foot-tall, tanned, towhead specimen of a man. He was muscular and fit from his days working on his family's farm and spending time in the army. Dad was a lover of nature and life. He was the philosopher. He would randomly throw out phrases of wisdom that I only now seem to realize were earth-shifting lessons on life and how to see it.

My parents loved the beach and always seemed to be called to the water. We lived very close to Fair Haven Beach State Park. A 1,100-acre state park on the Southeastern shore of Lake Ontario in upstate New York. Almost every summer weekend we would be there. The lake had a narrow beach that my brother and I would love to play on. We would dart back and forth, barefoot on the pebble-laden sand, like firewalkers dancing on hot coals. We would spend hours splashing in the water and swimming in the cold lake. This was when I got my first boogie board at age 11. I would glide back and forth on this piece of fiberglass until my bare feet were blistered and my entire body sunburned from hours in the sun and surf.

After an exhausting morning in the water, my father would drive up a winding tree-lined lane to the breathtaking bluffs that overlooked this spectacular body of water. The intoxicating smell of burnt charcoal permeated the air. You could always smell the delicious scent of meat being grilled on the permanent outdoor iron grills. The mix of grilled hotdogs mingled with an aroma of pine that would be carried on the breeze over the bluffs.

My mom would open up the picnic basket pulling out a one pound can of Charles' potato chips which my brother and I would devour by the handfuls in minutes, craving the salt after a long morning of beaching around.

The next year, my parents put an in-ground pool in our back yard. We lived in that pool every summer from early May to Late October.

I was 14 years old when I first saw the ocean. My parents decided to take us on a family outing to Ocean City, Maryland. I remember walking up over castle-like sand dunes not knowing what to expect on the other side. Before my eyes lay a vast and breathtaking panorama that brought tears to my eyes. I wasn't even sure what I was looking at, as I had never seen such a huge body of water that seemed to have no borders. Only the Western skyline had a minuet separation between sea and air. If it were not for several boats on the horizon, I would have truly believed that the cloudless sky was pouring into the massive blue basin before me.

The warm July air kissed my face as a strong aroma of salt filled my nostrils. My mom took me by the hand and escorted me to the shoreline. The sandals wedged on my feet like shackles preventing me from running faster. I couldn't wait to get out of them and dip my digits into the surprisingly cool water. My brother and I were so excited! It was like Christmas and New Year's rolled into one. We spent hours swimming and building sand castles, sunbathing, and listening to the seagulls as they sounded the alarm every time the wind changed. It was a real beach, filled with treasures of colorful seashells popping their heads out of the off-white sand. The faint smell of coconut suntan oil and beach jasmine seemed to meld together in a sensory fusion of warmth and magic.

I would chase the receding water into the sea as the in-coming waves would chase me back on to the sand. I was in ecstasy. I would proceed to do this for what seemed like hours. It was as if I had found a new friend to play with. At one point, a wave caught me by surprise bowling me over into the sand, filling my mouth with water. As I stood up coughing out the sea, I could hear my father say, "ya gotta hold your breath." It wouldn't be the last time I got a mouthful of sea water.

It was then, that my brother Steven, pointed outward towards the horizon, "Look! Surfers!" he exclaimed. We all turned to see three guys straddling little boards that looked no bigger than the boogie board I got at age 11. They were all staring off into the distance seemingly waiting for the next wave to hop on. Unfortunately, the waves rolling into shore seemed no bigger than my waist. I thought to myself, "maybe they know something is coming." It was quite a conundrum to me. I was perplexed. What I did find so amazing was the incredible imagery it left in my mind. Three young, tanned, "surfer dudes" just hanging out on their boards, waiting to catch the next wave. I could glimpse their colorful board shorts and short sleeve wet suits. Their long, wet hair and confident postures inspired me as I yearned

for that life style. I dreamt about it for years, making that the image of “cool” in my mind’s eye.

I was an awkward, gawky kid by my teens. I hung out with the dreamers. Those were the kids with big ideas but had no idea how to execute them. Unexecuted dreams seemed more the reality, especially if your fate was growing up in a small, uncultured town. Although, somehow, I believed there was a way, thanks to the world my parents would show us whenever we got to go on a vacation or take a day trip.

I had the prerequisite acne most kids had, but mine was ten times worse than most. My mom took me to a dermatologist who gave me the most common topical drug for acne at that time, which did help the blemishes fade, but made my face bright red as if I were standing in the sun all day. I wore glasses from the age of six, had braces on my teeth, and suffered from deplorable anxiety and worry. I was always stressed about what people thought about me and what disaster would come next. I was constantly getting picked on or bullied for my acne or my glasses. I suffered with dyslexia and was extremely conscious about it. By the age of 15 my family doctor had me on Valium in order to quell the bouts of anxiety and teen angst I was suffering from.

I was a raging hormonal soup kitchen of anger, lust, and confusion. I had no idea who I was or why. On top of all this, I hated wearing shoes. My feet always seemed to be growing and it was really difficult for my mom to keep me in shoes that fit properly. I preferred being barefoot. I just felt “mentally” better when I was not restricted by some pair of clodhoppers.

My parents got me involved in everything. I ran track and cross-country, played baseball, and hockey. I was in the music department and played trumpet and piano. I sang in chorus and a local singing group. I think my parents didn’t know what to do with me and were just trying to distract me from myself. I had low self-esteem and always felt as if I was taking up too much space in this world. I would even sit half way in a chair, because I remember thinking I didn’t deserve to sit fully back and relax. I was a teenage mess.

I remember my mom gave me a book for my 15th birthday about astronomy. That book opened an entire Universe for me, literally. Several nights a week I would go outside, spread a large blanket on the grassy knoll along the side of our house, and lay back with my book identifying the constellations. I

would shine my little flashlight on each page, eagerly drinking in the information about the planets and how they revolve around a massive sun that was at the heart of our solar system. That solar system, being one of many solar systems, was within one corner of our Milky Way Galaxy. That galaxy, was one of hundreds of galaxies stretched across a tiny fraction of space. The concept was hard to fathom. How insignificant it seemed to make me feel.

I would read stories about the constellations and how they represented Greek Gods, fearless animals, and symbols that honored ancient wisdom. I studied all about the moon and its phases and how it would affect our tides and some would even say, our mood. As I grew older, I would learn how the zodiac was intertwined within this narrative, along with the metaphysics of nature. These studies would often come together, blurring the lines between art and science, drawing me deeper and deeper into their powerful stories. I was hooked.

Spring break came and my parents wanted to take us to see Florida and share with us the wonderful memories they had created when they were young. We drove from New York to Florida, stopping in practically every state to see a little piece of history or at least a fun attraction. Besides Howe Caverns, dining at Stucky's, or buying 3-D post cards in South Carolina's South of the Border, most of the trip was a blur until we were in Florida.

The Sunshine State was aptly named. We stopped in Palm Beach to see the hotel where mom and dad met and fell in love. We swam at the beach and ate out every night. I remember never sleeping as well as I did in Florida. I was in paradise. I could run around in bare feet or flip flops. It was sun-filled days and breathtaking beaches, good food, and a carefree two-weeks of vacation.

Our last stop was Miami Beach. In the late 70s Miami was past its heyday and was now the "place you went to die." As we drove down along Collins Ave and turned on to Ocean Drive, I was traumatized by the hundreds of elderly people simply sitting on rocking chairs in the stifling summer heat. It was if Miami Beach had morphed into one giant old-folks home. We parked along Ocean Drive and walked across Lummus Park.

This sacred jewel situated between the mainland and the sea, was a strip of beach that was kissed by the warm Gulf Stream, which rose to meet the sand along Miami Beach. This part of the Gulf Stream, referred to as the Florida

current, maintained an average water temperature at or above 77 °F during the winter. The East winds moved over this warm water and pushed balmy air from the Gulf Stream, inland. This kept temperatures milder across the coast than anywhere else throughout the Southeast, especially during the winter. When the Gulf Stream meandered up along this precious beach, it revealed the most beautiful blue green water that I'd ever seen.

My bare feet enjoyed the warm, gritty goodness as we plodded through the spikes of seagrass, over the dunes and down onto the palatial beach. There in front of us was a blue-green sea that reached as far as the eyes could see. The sun was behind us casting long shadows into the sand as the waves crashed upward to meet them. The water was as transparent as glass allowing us to see the shell and coral fragments at the bottom. Now, at low tide, the azure sea introduced large islands of sand that we would wade out to through the warm water. We'd stop to play on them, and then run through the ankle-deep liquid to the next one.

I was in my element. The unbelievable weather made every day an exceptional one. The cloudless, blue sky was constantly met by a turquoise sea. The warm, salty air seemed to be a natural remedy for my over active acne. The daily sun melted away my deep, obsessive anxiety, and constant worry. In fact, the entire two weeks had past and I never once asked for the Valium. I never felt stressed or thought once about school.

On our last day in Miami, we went down to the beach to see the sunrise and have one last swim in that magic blue water. The sun was just peeking above the horizon and I could tell it was high tide because the water was almost to the lifeguard stands. The waves were large swells that would break far out and roll into our feet. There they were. Surfers stretched out along the foreground of the rising sun. It looked like a gathering of birds migrating Eastward now, stopping to gather their resources and take flight again. Every now and then you would see a random surfer pick their wave, run their break, then paddle right back out to the flock. I was swimming along the shoreline, but couldn't take my eyes off of them. My dreams of surfing and being that "cool surfer dude," starting reoccurring once again.

My overwhelming emotions and anxiety returned after our trip to Florida. My only solace would be the two weeks of amazing memories left over from that trip. Thanks to our parents, they were able to show us a different view of the world, wherever we traveled. I knew they did not have a lot of money and were always struggling to pay the bills, but somehow, they managed to

show my brother and me something other than the four corners of our farm. Because of them, we were encouraged to dream, even if they seemed to be a faraway illusion. Our parents encouraged it, nonetheless.

Now, back at school, the pressure of doing well and getting good grades was amplified by the stress of performing well in sports, in my music classes, and keeping up with every aspect of teenage life.

My parents thought it might be a good idea to expand my surroundings and perhaps make some new friends outside the school system that I so constantly dreaded. I started taking an extra-curriculum course at the local YMCA after school. It was free to the community and was a good way to keep kids out of trouble. By the second week, the astronomy class I signed up for was canceled, due to a personal issue the teacher was dealing with. Across the hall from that canceled class was a dance class. I remember being drawn to the glass window watching as the kids would bend and stretch their bodies in unbelievable ways. They would go through sequences of dance exercises and then put everything they had learned into a final routine. Their fluid bodies moved through space to a mesmerizing beat of drummers and musicians playing live music in one corner of the room.

When the instructor gave the dancers a 15-minute break, she walked over to me. "You should be in this class," she recommended.

"Oh, I have no dance training," I said sheepishly. I could feel my body sinking back into my shell.

"This is a beginner's class. Yes, there are a few dancers here who are at a different level, but the more experienced ones help the newer ones," she said proudly. "Your class was just cancelled. Come and take this class."

In my mind, I was working out every way I could possibly do this. I ended up not telling my parents that my other class was canceled and would come every week for this class.

I couldn't keep that secret too long, before my parents wondered why I was coming home sweaty and exhausted, limping my way into the shower, and pouring myself into bed. "I'm taking a dance class," I confessed to my parents after they drilled me with questions. The reaction was not what I imagined. My father simply walked away while my mother asked me more questions about the class. For them, I assumed they thought it was just

another distraction to keep me engaged. What they didn't realize was that it went from a curiosity to an earth-moving passion.

It's as if my body and mind were made to dance. Each week, I would intently study the movements, learn to stretch further and deeper, as my body underwent a transformation. My athletic background allowed me the stamina to move freely and with strength, while my musical background gave me an edge on how I would hear the counts, cues, and rhythms that would bring me a better understanding of the movement. All the pieces were coming together. It was probably the defining moment of my existence! I knew it was all I ever wanted to do. I needed to dance more than anything else.

Along with this, I no longer seemed to depend on Valium to calm my nerves. My issues with dyslexia, seemed less, due to my strong ability to have to concentrate harder on how to move as a dancer. My mind was now distracted by trying to understand this obsession. It seemed as if dance took my mind out of my body. Dance gave me a reason to participate in life.

By the second month, my body started to change. I was losing my baby fat. My core strength not only gave me a better sense of my body, but a better sense of self. Much more than any gym class or run around the track could do. I worked hard and for that hard work, I was rewarded with confidence and a sense of pride I'd never known before.

Dance consumed my life. I could not get enough of watching dancers on television or in the movies. I bought books about famous dancers and read about different styles and techniques. A variety of teachers would teach us styles from all different genres of dance. After several weeks, they would change styles, moving from ballet to jazz, modern to tap. It's as if we would learn a new language every few weeks. By the end of the school year, I felt a metamorphosis overtaking me. This form of self-expression allowed me to feel as if I could emerge from my cocoon with unabashed permission.

Of course, this was a double-edged sword. I still had to go back home and face the same, small minded friends and close-minded individuals that seemed to want to hold me back, judge me, or felt I had to fit into their idea of what someone should be like. If not, then they considered me an outcast. So, I kept my dance life under wraps.