



President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama dancing during the Commander in Chief's Ball, 2009. Photo: Senior Airman Kathrine McDowell, U.S. Air Force

The politics of extraordinary possibilities

Pegge Vissicaro explains how current conditions are favourable for a new American dance revolution that draws on diversity to build creative communities

31 July 2010 was National Dance Day in the United States. I would not have known except for the fact that it was advertised during season seven of *So You Think You Can Dance*, which I watched on a semi-regular basis. The idea for such an occasion came from the show's executive producer and judge Nigel Lythgoe as a means to persuade our nation to move. Never before had anything like this occurred in the United States. Conceived by a Brit no less, America's National Dance Day grew from the widespread popularity of televised dance competitions.

In 2009, Lythgoe cofounded Dizzy Feet Foundation with the mission to elevate and standardise the quality of dance education throughout the United States. Working with his nonprofit organisation, Lythgoe contacted First Lady Michele Obama to propose National Dance Day as a way to bring people together from all walks of life to promote health and self-esteem nationwide. His proposal aligned closely with Mrs. Obama's Let's Move campaign designed to encourage physical activity for the increasing number of overweight children. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, a leader for the government's national healthy lifestyle movement, facilitated recognition of National Dance Day as an official act of Congress. It was commemorated in Washington, District of Columbia (D.C.) on the National Mall with a flash mob dance routine, available on www.dizzyfeetfoundation.org for people to learn and perform throughout the country that same day.

The three aims of House Resolution No. 1514 are to endorse nationwide >



TerraDance autumnal equinox, Tempe, Arizona.
Photo: Ari Vissicaro

dance education as a cultural and community builder, support the First Lady's initiatives that address childhood obesity, and further dance as an important form of physical fitness and artistic expression. Obviously passage of the bill provides a tremendous boost to dance in the United States, which is for the most part peripheral to everyday life. What caught my eye in the resolution were the words: dance, community, and artistic expression. I thought, "This is radical stuff! The combined forces of corporate America AND the Obama administration are fuelling the fire of a new dance revolution in the United States." A change in the collective culture of America is actually happening... a true paradigm shift!

The seemingly instantaneous achievement of a national platform for dance is largely unprecedented in the United States. It is a uniquely 21st century phenomenon that has grabbed people's interest facilitated by mass media, specifically social networking technology and an audience entertained by youth culture, physical virtuosity, and the competitive spirit. While farther beneath the radar, dance as an artistic tool to engage and develop communities will likely benefit from the same attention captivating our nation. Strategically, the model proposed by House Resolution No. 1514 provides THE foundation from which to build a more comprehensive policy about the vital role dance can achieve in United States society. In effect, it becomes a catalyst to completely revolutionise how Americans think and act toward dance with the potential to meaningfully connect people to the social and natural environment through a heightened sense of self.

From my view, this important resolution is like a major tributary of a larger river shaping America's socio-cultural landscape. All the water flowing together represents a convergence of many events that provide the conditions for extraordinary possibilities to emerge, creating a watershed moment in our nation's history. It's the perfect storm! Faced with the current economic problems, the citizens of the United States have no choice but to adapt to a new reality, requiring major reform in how they spend money, take care of their health, and relate to the world. It's a long overdue wake-up call, which shouts at people to question priorities, specifically attitudes toward developing more sustainable practices.

One such sustainable practice considers the value of community investment to effect positive change. At a grassroots level there is a rapidly growing interest in community development as an antidote to counteract social disintegration and other unhealthy behaviours that occur among highly industrialised and technologically dependent nations. This renewed emphasis on community implies social interaction, a basic human need. People interact to 'know'. However, in times of adversity and unpredictability, interaction serves as a coping mechanism to build mutually supportive relations based on cooperation and trust. Interaction animates and mobilises community formation, which offers solidarity and an anchor of stability in an increasingly dynamic world.

In the USA today communities are taking on new roles as important forms of social capital. With the ability to leverage individual assets, the emerging model of sustainability harnesses the collective energy of a group to reshape

society. While recognising that every group is equally diverse, each person contributes a unique perspective and understanding of the world. At a local level, the combination of these knowledge resources offers a wide range of information and ideas, which may be used to solve problems facing the community. The variety of experiences and viewpoints also provides the opportunity for groups to extend networks and develop partnerships that enhance self-sustaining practices. Further, diversity is essential for producing social capital. In communities, members naturally encounter differences between each other, which creates tension. Commitment to collaboration and mutual exchange that benefits the group means negotiating differences to find common ground. This process leads to new ways of knowing, encourages discovery, and stimulates imagination to envision a more civil society.

We have in the United States more than 300 million individuals in motion through space and time. Continued migration within borders and across borders diversifies thought and interaction, reinforcing the connective tissue that unites Americans. Dance creatively engages people to meet 'difference' as a strategy to adapt to these changing contexts, forming sustainable community connections. At this favourable time in history with the support of our nation's leaders and corporate media we are afforded extraordinary possibilities to reposition dance as central to human experience. This is a quantum leap toward understanding the communal force of dance to shape social transformation.

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