



# Happily ever after

At the age of 37 **Marc Vlemmix**, founder of the Dance For Health foundation in the Netherlands for people with chronic movement disorders, was diagnosed with Parkinson's. For a while he tried to ignore it, but it got worse and worse. Something had to happen. The answer turned out to be right in front of his nose

*Julian's bay  
Malta  
Having a drink on a terrace,  
Enjoying the sun  
And the summer sea breeze  
In the middle of a conversation  
I got up  
And without any excuse  
I ran away along the bay  
In one straight line  
to my apartment.  
Like Cinderella leaving the ball  
5 minutes before midnight  
Just before the carriage turned back  
into a pumpkin again  
I knew that if I was fast, I would be  
able to get home  
Just before the transformation  
Just before my body would turn off  
Because that's what it does,  
After more than eight years of living  
with Parkinson's disease,  
That's what I have to cope with,*

*Learning to live with a body that can  
switch off at any second of the day.*

**As founder of the Dance for Health foundation, I was invited by Natalie Muschamps, of the organisation Step up for Parkinson's, to share my mission - to change people's lives through movement - with the Maltese community.**

For me the art of dance and the art of living are placed very close together since my diagnosis. It is the art of living, to 'be'. It is an art to achieve this because with Parkinson's the body and mind can often get in the way, dominating each other and competing for attention. If we can succeed in making them listen to each other it frees the mind and body together in 'surrender'. And surrender is never an act of force, but an act of openness, and peace. Openness and

surrender to the dance brings me to my core. It makes me strong in my vulnerability.

I believe in the whole person. At Dance for Health we encourage people to be curious about their own situation with a positive attitude, to surprise themselves and push boundaries of what they think is possible.

We put people moving first. Art and dance can breathe life into everyday movement and taking part in Dance for Health classes is initiated by a desire to shape one's own experience in an enjoyable and uplifting way. At Dance for Health we connect dance with health. Health is not just about your physical condition, but about feeling healthy and beautiful, from the inside out.

That's the challenge, to surrender



Photos: Rob Hogeslag and commissioned by Dance for Health.

to the dance, not to dance to the Parkinson's tune.

To get there we have to look ourselves in the eye.

*It's like being in a boxing ring  
Without boxing gloves  
Without any training in advance  
Finding out that there is no opponent  
in the ring  
But the opponent is secretly taking  
his space into your own body  
Recognising this  
You know that by fighting it, there  
will only be losers  
But if you surrender to the dance,  
Then you can start to play around  
with your own body  
Parkinson's brought me to dance  
as a need  
But the moment when I went on  
beyond the need,  
I could really start to develop my  
dancing skills  
in which I could surprise myself  
and others.*

Developing something in your body during the process you are in, where Parkinson's is progressing and taking step by step more space, dancing is an ultimate empowerment experience, which is not about changing your perspective any more but really about improving.

At the beginning of the year I decided to really surrender to the

dance, to start a process in the studio under the creative guidance of choreographer Itamar Serussi to find new ways for my body to move. Working with a professional who takes me seriously as a dancer, who doesn't approach me as the sum of my Parkinson's, makes the difference. Dancing as a form of art is closely connected with my core and the fact that Itamar treated me as a dancer, not a Parkinson's patient, was incredibly valuable for my sense of identity and for my creative potential.

Recently we spent four whole days in a creative process in a studio. For a moment I felt like Cinderella again. This time not afraid that when the clock would tick to midnight, everything would change. No, it felt more like the moment where the prince finally did find the foot that fits the glass slipper. Where Cinderella didn't need the golden carriage or the fancy dress, but here beauty did shine from the inside out straight through her dirty skin.

Itamar did give every participant one theme that in his opinion would fit his or her personality. In my case it was the phrase 'high heels'. On day two I brought in some shoes, not glass slippers but some real black stilettos. Can you imagine? Me with my eight years of Parkinson's, balance and walking problems, dancing on heels? Strange? Yes - but not really.

It happens a few times a day that I unconsciously start to walk on the tip of my toes as a result of Parkinson's. In Dutch it's an expression: 'To walk on the tips of your toes'. It means that you act and live at the highest possible speed, continuously pushing your limits. As a child my mother did warn me many times, 'not to push myself to the limit all the time'. But now, at the age of 45, coming close to my core, I found out that I like to push myself to the limit, I like to 'walk on the tips of my toes'.

*Then what?  
Out of balance?  
Wobbly?  
Is it physically? Or is it a fear?  
What happens first, the physical  
un-balance or the fear for it?  
And is it possible to completely  
go beyond it,  
to let loose the break,  
Get on the dance floor,  
just go and don't stop.  
In a flow,  
Like Cinderella at the ball  
Dancing  
without fear  
Enjoying  
yourself  
Feeling beautiful!  
Happily ever after.*

**Info**  
[www.danceforhealth.nl](http://www.danceforhealth.nl)