

## The Greatest Therapy of All: The Healing Power of Ballroom Dance

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

DENNIS YELKIN FELT BROKEN. HE had been actively nauseated for six weeks after receiving a powerful chemoblast to treat his multiple myeloma in June 2018. His life was on hold; his world was small. He lay in bed. One more breath. Don't throw up. He was back to his "loner" days as a teen and young adult.

"When I'm sick, I am my own best caregiver. I don't need anyone. Visitors are an intrusion to my privacy."

Weak as he was, his artistic passion was reignited. He couldn't pursue his love of dance, so he immersed himself in creating small art projects, keeping his artistic passion alive, including a 3D miniature of his ancestral family farm.

"I could only work on it fifteen minutes at a time. I would go downstairs to my studio until I got a headache or felt so out of sorts I had to go upstairs to bed for an hour. I would wake up, go downstairs, and work on it for fifteen minutes. This would go on all day long for six weeks. I couldn't dance, but I had to create something."

And he did. Alone, but for his life partner, Jim.

I could hardly know what Dennis was going through when he allowed me to visit him. I was one of few friends Dennis would see in person. As his social dance partner, I did my best to provide empathetic support. Mostly, we talked about his inspiring art and our longing to dance again. That would not happen until months later when we danced at our December Social Dance Club black tie dinner. For months Dennis left home only for the hospital.

"I was so happy I could dance again and see people. Life was going to be OK," he said. "I was getting my appetite back. It was the beginning of a new life for me. Could I even do it? I think muscle memory took over; so many things to think about—the dance steps, the rhythm, the synchronizations, they happen quicker than you can think. There are constant impulses and strategies. That's why it is wonderful mind-body therapy. I craved the physical contact. I missed it so much."

Dennis wore his wool tuxedo that hung loosely on his thin frame. He

wore his grey knit chemo hat. He hadn't worn anything but sweatpants for weeks. We celebrated as we waltzed and rumbaed to live music, and our club friends welcomed him back. At my urging, he asked my college friend Barbara Peterson Burwell (a former Miss USA) to dance. They looked like they danced together for years.

Dennis was back, at least physically.

Dennis didn't know that Barbara's husband had gone through multiple myeloma himself before he died from unrelated causes. Nor did he know that Barbara was a cancer survivor herself. As Dennis recalled,

"I casually told Barbara I was warm in my wool tux and cancer cap to cover my peach fuzz. 'Why don't you take the cap off?' she asked. 'Ohhhh, I'd be embarrassed,' I said. 'Why would you be embarrassed? You are among



*Dennis Yelkin and Ember Reichgott Junge. Photos by Ryan Kenner.*

friends.’ And I realized at that moment that I was among friends, and I would be more comfortable being my true self, which was peach fuzz head.”

Up to then Dennis took off his hat only briefly. Others had told him he didn’t need it because he had a “nice shaped head.”

Said Dennis, “I heard that so often. I didn’t believe them; they were just being nice. But this time, I felt an immediate connection to someone who had gone through this. She knows of what she speaks. So when she suggested it, it seemed valid. I took off my hat. Such relief! My head was sweating. I focused on dancing with Barbara; I wanted to make her look good and have a good time. People told me I looked great. They told me I had a nice shaped head. That night was the beginning of my real recovery. My emotional recovery. I

felt new energy. I got so much positive feedback that night that it gave me confidence. It was just a relief to not have that damn hat on around other people. OK, I can do this. People are fine with it.”

I saw the transformation first-hand in Dennis. A few weeks later, as Dennis gained strength, I suggested we do something we had never done before—create a solo dance routine to track our journey together through Dennis’ painful health challenge. Dennis was hesitant at first. He wasn’t sure he wanted to tell that story.

We asked dance professional Scott Anderson to choreograph it. His wife, Amy, selected Carole King’s “You’ve Got a Friend” as a message from me.

Said Dennis, “Because of our long working relationships, we were very candid with each other. We expressed if

something wasn’t working. In the end, the process of creating that routine was the best therapy I could have ever had.”

The routine evolved over a year’s time. It starts with a depressed Dennis in his chemo cap.

“When I stooped over at the beginning of the routine, it was authentic. I felt broken, even though all my lab numbers were now going in the right direction. Scott, in his genius, helped me portray how I was feeling after that cancer blast,” recalled Dennis.

As for me, I learned how to encourage my suffering friend back to dance again, step by step, even lifting his arm onto my shoulder so we could partner. We both knew what came next, inspired by Barbara. I needed to remove his cap to free him.

“When you pulled my cancer cap off during the routine, I had a visceral gut reaction, because that hat is what I was hiding behind. I didn’t want to talk to people about my health; yet I was wearing the emblem of cancer. I hated that hat, but it was my security blanket. So when I desperately reached out for that hat during our routine, it was from the gut,” recalled Dennis.

From there, joy begins to emerge, and Dennis becomes stronger and stronger. He dips me, we celebrate. Then he lifts me. What? When Scott first suggested a lift, I wasn’t so sure. While Dennis is a trained improvisation dancer and even has done aerial dance, he was now 74 years old, weighed around 150 pounds, and was still recovering from cancer! I was just a few years younger and not exactly petite at 5’6” and 140 pounds. We were solid mid-level competitive dancers, but certainly not dance champions. A lift?

The courage Dennis had! Sure, there was a fall along the way in an early performance. But with Scott’s help, we found a lift that worked.



*Dennis Yelkin and Ember Reichgott Junge.*

Recalled Dennis, “When I lifted you up and spun you around—I’m celebrating! I’m flying! It’s a big Y-E-S- YES! My friend Barbara McAfee wrote a song called YES and sometimes when I was lifting you, I would sing that song!”

We kept at it, for much more than dance.

As Dennis shared, “Very often during rehearsals we both got teary-eyed because it brought back memories of when I was so sick. It was difficult to demonstrate to Scott or other students how vulnerable I was. When I was sick I thought I didn’t need anyone. But during this routine, I realized that I DID need other people’s help, and that’s one reason I got emotional. I realized how much I needed other people—something I never admitted to myself. A person can go to a private therapist or group therapy, but to visually and viscerally be able to tell our story was the type of therapy—and type of

healing—that I needed. I didn’t want to go around talking to everybody. I was able to physically express what I felt. Who gets to do this if they’re not in the dance world? Dancing is such a significant and powerful way to tell a story that words could never express.”

Dennis was declared in remission in September 2019. By coincidence, for January 2020, The Snow Ball Dancesport Competition organizer Donna Edelstein, herself a recent cancer survivor, was already creating a special focus for competitors who shared that experience, whom she named “Cancer Conquerors.” Donna invited Dennis and me to showcase our routine the final evening.

We danced with everything we had. When we finished, we both knew the routine was our best.

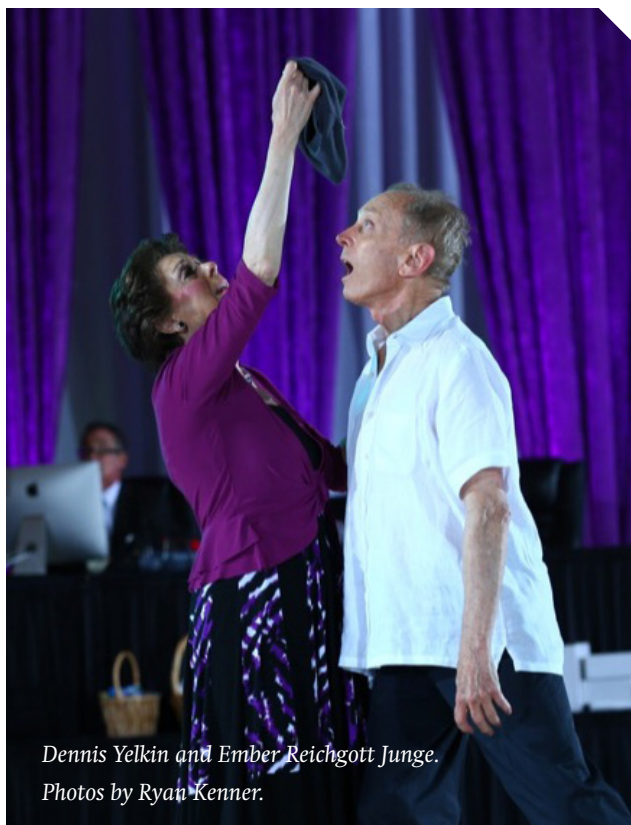
Said Dennis, “We reacted to each other’s emotions authentically and they were right there. They were real.

That’s what the audience felt. I never danced anything like that before.”

Nor had I. It felt so good. We fed off each other in our friendship and bond of over 28 years. As one judge critiqued, “I can see it’s being danced from the soul.” From another: “Such a powerfully emotional solo. Thank you.”

Dennis, the self-described loner in his early years, was fully his authentic adult self—a connector. That night he connected hearts with strangers and love with friends. So many friends. He inspired other cancer survivors. Some rose to their feet after the performance. I know he will inspire COVID-19 survivors the same way.

It is about the healing power of dance. The greatest therapy of all. ■



*Dennis Yelkin and Ember Reichgott Junge.  
Photos by Ryan Kenner.*



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