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Sometimes I Kiss Flowers

Thank you. President Shinobu Inamori-Kanazawa, distinguished guests, and fellow Laureates, thank you so much for the privilege of sharing with you.

I'm going to begin with a little preface. The Foundation has asked me to talk about my life as a young person and how I think I was formed, and I've actually never discussed this, so I'm actually kind of excited.

Okay. So a significant portion of the life and work of William Forsythe is now the subject of extensive public record and is perhaps in this context not in need of elaboration or repetition. But what I can provide today is a more intimate perspective on William Forsythe's early career and life that is not actually part of any public record.

Billy Forsythe is how William Forsythe was called until the beginning of his 40s. It is necessary to note Billy's formative experiences in order to perform some kind of triangulation in understanding the later-appearing Bill Forsythe and the public-facing William Forsythe.

All three—Billy, Bill and William—have choreographed, most importantly, though, they are self-taught, as choreography, especially ballet choreography, is an auto-didactic field. Exclusively auto-didactic. At present, not one of the highly visible choreographers, who are fully versed in the structural intricacies of classical ballet, is the product of an educational program. Not one.

To my knowledge, there is at present not a single conservatory, college or other such institution which offers a comprehensive program of specialization in the subject of professional ballet choreography.

Now, compare this to every other field of expertise in the arts and sciences that is open to public critique and analysis, and you have a rather shocking anomaly: no schools, no teachers. Can you imagine? All right. So, given this rather odd professional precondition, what did comprise my training?

So, it's 1955, and my earliest memory of dancing was of course from my parents and their friends around the age of 5, and to their delight, I would pretend I was Fred Astaire and hold an imaginary Ginger Rogers as a partner, and I would put on rather enthusiastic little performances in the living room. Unbeknownst to Fred Astaire, he and his brilliant choreographic colleagues were my very first models of danced excellence, my very first teachers.

Another early example of my enthusiasm involved smelling every and any flower that came my way. It also involved talking to those flowers, and, as you might suspect, on occasion, kissing them.

As a child, nature did not feel separate, and this connection was encouraged by my mother who always shared her own fascination with flowers and nature, and as soon as I had the dexterity, she taught me to arrange flowers for the household. These arrangements were, I believe, my very first conscious foray into the domain of aesthetics.

I am still fascinated by floral composition and admire the great practitioners tremendously. In my later teenage years, after fruitlessly searching for a program to train as a landscape designer, I applied for a scholarship to travel to Japan to study Ikebana, but I did not qualify. I instead practiced on my own, the best I could, and I practice still, the best I can.

Somewhat in alignment with that, I was eventually given the role of the person who was to decorate the family Christmas tree. Quite an honor. I couldn't have been a happier child, having been given the opportunity to independently compose an aesthetics of explosive, luminant

proliferation. This particular decorative task, though, induced a state of intense focus, which I alleviated periodically by lying under the tree.

Now, in and under the tree, the arrangements of the lights and shiny ornaments radically altered my perception of the task, and so I would alternate standing in front of the tree and lying under the tree to compose the results I was aiming for. This compositional strategy unquestionably prefigured choreographic procedures applied later in my career.

I have been regarded as a post-classicist, but I would rather like to offer the term “endo-classicist”: someone who analyzes and assembles from within the sensation of ballet’s immense array of anatomical articulations, not observing and assembling exclusively from without, but dialoguing with interior and exterior positions. Inside-out, as it were.

So, the trajectory of an artform has been influenced by a tree. Thank you, tree.

My father, who had a flawless instinct for humor based on wordplay, was also someone very aware of the aesthetics of his surroundings. In fact, I think of him as a kind of connoisseur. With loving discernment, he gathered antique examples of arts and crafts, furniture, and conveyed to me what he knew about these historical examples of elevated craftsmanship, and I think the fact that not art but craft was more revered in our household is an important detail in my development.

Importantly, my father explained to me the details of why he liked the things he did, on what grounds his preferences were based, which is a key distinction one must make when communicating with adult artists in the rehearsal studio.

My father’s profession was somehow similar to mine in so far as he worked with a team of artists, visual artists, who produced drawings for his Manhattan-based advertising agency, which dealt exclusively in illustrations for print advertisements. He would sometimes take me along on studio visits where I could see the artists focus on their non-commercial work, usually oil paint on canvas. And they would let me observe them while they painted, and they explained to me what they were attempting.

Now, as a child, I noticed that little difference: attempt. Although they all seemed impossibly skilled from my perspective, they allowed uncertainty a place in their practice and their craft. Interesting. Interesting teachers. Parent mentors.

My mother shared my father’s sensibilities, and I might add, always smelled like a bouquet of flowers. She taught me to identify where the scents of some other perfumes originated in the garden. I believe my parents were people who deeply appreciated the world that our senses offer us.

Apropos, by the age of six, my mother had taught me to body surf in the ocean, a practice with an immensely valuable lesson to teach me, which is: to work with what nature was offering you and to partner and adapt. This is an approach that guides me through the unpredictable dynamics of a creation process.

The ocean has composed some of the most vivid physical dialogues I have ever experienced, and had I not sufficiently partnered and adapted with some particular waves, I might not have been able to be here to share this with you. To me, the ocean feels like an organism that seems to understand the nature of breath and, by extension, death, and it effortlessly reminds you of this impressive fact.

Teachers are perhaps within everything.

My teenage years in the 1960s were spent in non-stop motion. I cannot tell you how many times at school I was asked to sit still. I actually started choreographing in 1963 at the age of 13—that’s 61 years ago—which included numerous high school musicals and skits, and I sang in several choirs and vocal ensembles and I played several instruments, and I designed all the high school dances, among other things. I was a human tornado, but a fundamentally creative tornado.

I really, really, really wanted to learn tap dancing, but my parents, unsurprisingly, sent me to ballroom dancing classes instead.

My maternal Austrian grandfather, a violin prodigy in his own right and my violin teacher, had announced to me that the career in classical music that he was preparing me for was not going to happen. And in his very strong Austrian accent he offered the comment, “Villy, Villy, Villy, you will never be a great violinist. Ja? But you could be a very good conductor.” Thank you, grandpa.

So, in addition to teaching me the rudiments of conducting, he then proceeded to carefully take me through his extraordinary record collection and point out nuances in different conductors and instrumentalists’ interpretations. This proved to be another introduction to the possibilities of artistic differentiation, not so similar to the way my father had illuminated nuances in his field of artisanal interest.

A family of teachers.

Aside from endless dancing in popular styles at school, I also spent many afternoons by myself in my family’s kitchen dancing to Broadway musicals that were broadcast on the radio. My partners at this time were no longer imaginary, like Ginger Rogers, but rather all the handles on the kitchen appliances and drawers and cupboards. And with a terrifying velocity, I would launch myself into bizarre pas-de-deux between the appliances, as only an exuberant teenager could. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a dynamic similar to the push-pull mechanics of these kitchen duets was later introduced as a unique component of the partnering work in the ballets that would later emerge.

Who would have thought that kitchen appliances could have influenced the conventions of an artform?

Now, given that I could sing and of course dance, I had the idea that I would somehow go to Broadway. I had absolutely no formal dance training whatsoever, but nonetheless, I took myself to open auditions in New York City, which was only a short train ride away.

In one memorable audition, the choreographer demonstrated something, and I expressed tremendous delight and asked, “Wow! What was that?” Now, the group of rather weary professional dancers in the room laughed because they thought I was being ironic, but I said, “No, what was that? It’s really cool.” To which the choreographer replied, “Young man, that was a pirouette.” I was of course immediately sent out of the audition.

I had no idea how one could learn this very cool move, a pirouette, so instead I threw myself into club dancing in what were the very first iterations of discos. At the disco, I persevered in the ferocious competitive dance environment until I was actually allowed to dance, albeit briefly, solo, on a raised central podium. This intimidating experience in public appraisal actually, helpfully, modeled the future realities of offering invention for public scrutiny.

Okay. Now we’ll jump back 10 years. That was in the ’60s, and this is back in 1957. My father had already begun to very subtly retract into the recesses of Parkinson’s disease when I was seven years old. Only 12 years later was this fully apparent, as a diagnosis for early onset Parkinson’s was not available in 1957. My father, sensing that something was deeply wrong, sought help in a religious approach to healing, as his physicians had only offered tranquilizers to address his symptoms. This particular religious approach he had adopted did not believe in the efficacy of doctors or actually in the reality of bodily disease or of the reality of the body. Or in fact, according to this doctrine, all conceptions of reality that posited it as real were fundamentally erroneous.

Now, although in some contexts, some of these arguments might be debated, they are not necessarily subjects for seven-year-olds, but the confrontation with these concepts actually provided me with my first introduction to a philosophical provocation. The shock of this challenge to my existence introduced a novel mode of mentality, which required a different kind of agility, mental agility in mental space. So, this moment is key to understanding Bill, who, when he appears later in life, was already deeply enamored of the sensation of thought challenges.

Billy had, though, through this serendipitous encounter with an outlier belief system, then trained to be a conceptual acrobat. It turns out Billy could mentally move not only concepts but

images, objects, bodies, which turned out to be very useful later on. Right ?! So, Billy had, by chance, been sent to mental acrobatics class. Fantastic.

As a side note, I still think tap classes might have been an adequate alternative.

At home, there was literature on the shelves, classics, translations, plays, a lot of poetry from different cultures, and, as an American kid of that epoch, there was an endless stream of comic books, magazines full of propaganda, newspapers, literature, though, became my strongest and most loved subject at school.

My great uncle Cornelius had been shell-shocked in the First World War and had spent the rest of his life only reading the dictionary. This fact fascinated me to no end, and I tried to emulate him, but rather with Roger's Thesaurus, which I still really enjoy reading.

My reading expanded into philosophy at the end of my 20s with ultimately the works of John Dewey, Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, and Alfred North Whitehead having a lasting impact upon my creative world view. The writing of these thinkers provided invaluable templates for approaching practice.

Meanwhile, back in the '50s, the black and white television, a relatively new invention at the time, had provided a window into the world of live broadcast, entertainment, classic movie musicals, cartoons. Oh, an aside, apropos cartoons and animated films, Walt Disney's film *Fantasia*—Is anyone familiar with that?—that's a very old film—was my first introduction to the principles of classical ballet choreography.

And on TV were, surprisingly, art films. It was the film *La Jetée* by Chris Marker, which I encountered in 1963 at the age of 13. This film preoccupied me for roughly half a century, functioning as a paradigm of fugally arranged visual narration. It profoundly influenced my approach to choreographic structuring. The filmmaker, Alain Resnais, also contributed a similar trove of possibilities, and his film *Providence* also exerted tremendous influence upon my work.

So, now, moving forward, we're in 1967. I am 17 years old. Let's skip or let's skim over my being shipped off to university to study business but instead deviously studying theater and art history. I did not tell my parents. We'll skip the details of following my roommate to ballet class one fateful day and realizing... Oh, yeah. I could finally learn the cool move called a pirouette, not skipping, though, the deeply committed teacher, Christa Long, who mentored me with an unparalleled, loving ferocity, my first actual dance teacher, who one day declared in a very strong German accent, "Yes, Billy, you are a dancer, but you are actually a choreographer."

Well, I really did not understand what she meant. I had been choreographing, as I mentioned, for several years, but I never thought of it as choreography from a formal perspective. It was just making dances for fun. Christa, my teacher, commissioned me at 18 to make my first official public work, and it apparently resonated quite well with audience and critics. So, all my previous coincidental lessons had somehow given me enough information to pass my first official public choreographic examination.

So at this moment, several ideas have taken hold. The "mathiness" of ballet, as my friend Theresa Ruth Howard likes to phrase it, unleashed a veritable mind-storm of re-combinative possibilities. Music now became a medium for imagining logical progressions of co-ordinations within a precisely defined environment of consistent rules. Ballet's complex kinetic puzzles and the movement strategies to solve their physics were my new teachers. Like the ocean wave, it allowed me to teach myself, but on its own terms.

The bodily dialogues with ballet, like those with the ocean waves, were protracted and intense and requiring a physical and mental engagement of an entirely new order.

Ballet, not unlike the philosophical challenge presented to my seven-year-old self, kept reasserting its non-existence. The idea of it, which comes before the act, was a conceptualized strategy that proposed ballet but only in theory. The enactments, these approximations of a collectively-held prescription, were at the beginning utterly unsustainable. Ballet frequently

obstructed, in my body, yes, its own manifestation, behaving like a particularly unpredictable ocean wave.

Ballet, it turns out, is impossible to sustain. Also, there is no moment of synchronic kinetic unity, like an object which could be described in all its simultaneous and constituent facets. There is no universally standardized description of reference as exists in the sciences.

So, ballet isn't to be accurately or comprehensively described at the level of its enactment, in its required aggregate of simultaneously different velocities of limbs, rotations, accelerations, vectors, centrifugal forces, ballistics. But, the convergence of these competing forces offers the participant a kind of unique opportunity to navigate an intense environment of perceptual facts.

The work of a ballet dancer is to harness the perceptual chaos intrinsically proposed by a choreography. I liked that.

It turns out that ballet dancing's complex accumulation was primarily composed of interwoven torqued and rotated folding patterns which at the level of professional expression, manifest as a specific state of being: being balletic. Not doing ballet, being balletic. It is an emergent property where the behavior of the whole system cannot be easily predicted or explained just by understanding its parts. The dancer must aggregate, synthesize, and then simultaneously prioritize multiple specific proprioceptive inputs.

I would like you to note also that the human body possesses a staggering 244 degrees of rotational freedom. Here it's only 7, right? (referring to a demonstrated arm movement). As William C. Wimsatt noted, "The more we can detect things in multiple ways, the more we are inclined to believe they exist." Understanding this is important because without this finely tuned, finely differentiated proprioceptive awareness, there seems to be no platform for ballet's emergence. Because this is what being balletic is: It's a fine-tuned sensitivity to minute difference, incredibly fine differences. A specific proprioceptive state aligned with specific spatial intention.

So, in order to secure a diminishing percentage of less specific pirouettes, I left university with a scholarship to a major ballet company in New York City. It's now 1969, and I, Billy, am now 19 years old and have been studying ballet for only a year-and-a-half. This was terrifying.

Ballet's impression on me was profound and to move to the center of North American ballet, New York City, during the tenure of choreographer George Balanchine at New York City Ballet was an extraordinary opportunity. That is an understatement.

Our entire global profession had been impacted by Balanchine's genius and by his dancers who expressed his ideas with astounding clarity of vision. My first teachers, some who had worked directly with Balanchine, were strict adherents to his revolutionary innovations. According to my teachers, there was actually no other model to study or emulate, and after witnessing the New York City Ballet's performances between 1969 and 1973, I could not have agreed more. Balanchine's work still remains for me the epitome of craft in our particular *métier*.

The vocabulary of Balanchine's work was firmly grounded in the simplicity of the academy, but the exquisite structural choices determined by his musicological expertise were confounding. Apropos Henri Poincaré, the great mathematician and physicist, wrote in 1913, "Invention consists in avoiding the construction of useless combinations and in constructing the useful combinations which are in infinite minority," he continues, "To invent is to discern, to choose." Balanchine is also known for expressing a similar craftsman-like approach, as did Johann Sebastian Bach. I believe this should sound a lot more difficult.

Balanchine's neoclassical work, as described by the scholar Mark Franko, was a question of technical principles shorn of all stylistic accretions, thereby implying all the anachronistic theatrical and aesthetic tropes that are strongly associated with classical repertoire.

So, I had found a model which illustrated that it is creatively acceptable, perhaps even preferable, to abandon previous determining standards. I was free, as Poincaré suggested, to choose. It said to me that ballet choreographies are inventions that wrangle with the historical

continuity of their very own innovations. This is what Balanchine seemed to be showing. Yet, one feature remains persistent, and that is pattern.

The composing of academically grounded ballet choreography is accomplished through the positioning of differences. The processing of pattern change is something that is fundamental to our human cognition and all choreographic structures. All choreographic structures acknowledge that they dialogue with that human faculty, the processing of pattern change.

The choreographic craft of ballet involves contrasting pattern expectation with pattern novelty, with surprise, so that the spectator becomes an active, acknowledged partner in the stream of events. Sustaining the audience's cognitive investment is finally a question of proportion, of structural rhythm.

So, what are we constructing patterns with?

At our balletic disposal are: actions that elevate and slide and swerve; actions that rotate and have trajectories of multiple limbs in multiple directions, accelerating and decelerating at different rates; airborne actions that have multiple rhythmic subdivisions, high-velocity ballistic rotations that descend suddenly; and most importantly, deformations of academic core components. Whereby academy offers the ground rules, choreography indicates where exception provides insight into the rationale of ground rule. Academy becomes a frame of reference.

We are now again going to go spring around, but I'm not sure at this point if it's forward or backwards, and I will, if I may ask, finish the lecture, even though I am at the limit of my time. If I may.

Okay, it's 1971, and I require knee surgery and decide to take a course in dance notation during my recuperation. In the 1920s, Rudolf von Laban, a dance and movement theoretician, developed a notation system called Labanotation. Labanotation is a method of recording human movement through a system of symbols. This was fascinating to learn, but an encounter with Laban's abstract system of spatial movement assignments, entitled *Space Harmony*, was life-altering.

The very curious 21-year-old Billy proceeded to investigate if there was any degree of compatibility between the two systems he had studied, Laban and classical ballet. Well, Laban's ideas, if applied to ballet processes, produced some surprising displacements and sequences, which seemed to upend some of the configurative traditions of ballet practice. These configurations did not disassemble ballet but simply revealed where historically-received notions of assemblage were precisely that—historical. Habit.

Yet, Laban's 20th century goals actually coincided with the original aims of ballet's 16th century founders. Like ballet's founders, Laban had hoped to reveal an underlying universal harmony through systematic movement procedures that resonated with classical Greek mathematics, poetic meter and philosophy, an attempt ultimately to unravel the mysteries of universal spirit. No small job there.

I was not particularly interested in that facet, but rather in the fact of matter: how the body registered the processing of these complex configurations. The wave of information that the sensations of those configurations produced allowed a new feeling of knowing. In our *métier*, in ballet, knowing feels like something. It feels like something. Ballet ultimately cannot look like anything for the dancer on stage. But rather, the complex relation of forms presented are deeply imprinted, memorized sensations.

A ballet choreography is a series of events governed by a set of physical values all changing at different and variable rates. When sustained engagement with such a compound differential framework is undertaken, the experience can imply to the dancer the possibility of encountering a unique brand of knowledge that might have eluded other kinds of experience. This was the founding strategy of ballet's 16th century originators, which seems to survive, albeit in vestigial form.

In ballet specifically, the practitioners must identify with the idea of abstract physical pattern as internal and external geometric assignments. Ballet is a geometric inscriptive practice that uses highly differentiated dynamic intention to nuance its spatial delineations. It can become, in some cases, a spatial meditation.

Lastly, in 1972, the year before he will leave New York to live abroad for 50-some odd years, Billy has one more deeply significant encounter.

In New York, Billy has had brilliant instructors who had imparted their technical and philosophical perspectives on the practice of ballet dancing, the most influential of which were Maggie Black and Finis Jhung, but one in particular imparted a unique choreographic perspective. Her name was Madam Boskovic.

Every day, all over the world, teachers assemble ballet's academic movements into novel combinations that emphasize the different facets required of a professional skillset. Every day, teachers invent and dancers memorize entirely new combinations of academic movements, which are in fact miniature choreographies. These combinations are often delivered to the dancers at considerable speed and are only repeated once, if at all, for clarity. A professional dancer must on average memorize 15 or possibly 20 entirely new combinations in a single class, six days a week. Cognitively, it is an excellent way to start your day.

Madam Boskovic, who I mentioned, who was perhaps in her 80s at the time I met her, taught ballet unusually only on Sundays. She was Serbian and had in the 1920s studied in Paris with the Russian exponent and teacher Olga Preobrajenska.

Now, this is what made the classes of Madam Boskovic unique. What made them unique was that her combinations, these ballet combinations, were engineered to evolve through space in a kind of kinetic reversal. The already complex counter-winding logic of what is called *épaulement* was in her hands a tool for further inversions of counter-torque and reversal. It's incredibly complicated. Ballet was, from her perspective, actually evolving backwards, inverted through space.

Anyone who has appreciated what William Forsythe has accomplished within the *métier* is actually recognizing the brilliance of this unacknowledged kinetic visionary, Madam Boskovic. It was very important for me to mention this person. I believe she is invisible in the history of dance, and I try to make her revolutionary ideas visible as often as I can. I have the greatest respect for this human being.

In conclusion, perhaps unsurprisingly, my career in this learning profession has been focused on the subject of education, the most important part of which has been to ask myself again and again, what would constitute the best possible environment to learn? On a daily basis I am a teacher in a learning environment. On a daily basis, I am a teacher in a learning position in rooms full of dancers who are undergoing a very similar reflexive act.

I remain unimaginably indebted to those dancers in the rehearsal room—my teachers—who I believe brought me to this podium. All of you deserve the deepest respect and gratitude. I thank all of you. Thank you very much.

You can watch the interview video after the commemorative lecture on the Kyoto Prize YouTube channel.

(<https://youtu.be/InekvWZPmrQ?si=pfX3Z3cMg9yY9RuU>)