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# Pilgrimage: True Belonging: Exploring the Human Desire to Belong Through Dance and Storytelling

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Running head: PILGRIMAGE: TRUE BELONGING

PILGRIMAGE: TRUE BELONGING: EXPLORING THE HUMAN DESIRE TO BELONG  
THROUGH DANCE AND STORYTELLING

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
graduation with Distinction

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## Abstract

The human sense of belonging morphs and changes as we mature and gain life experience. The relationships we make, or choose not to, affect the way we perceive ourselves, which directly correlates to our understanding of how we belong to the universe as a whole. Perception of self and belonging are inextricably connected, therefore by focusing on belonging to ourselves rather than to the world around us, we experience self-acceptance, allowing us to forge deeper, more meaningful connections with those we choose. True belonging is an active practice that takes effort, and involves reflection and critical evaluation of self. A toxic relationship can be detrimental to our own sense of self, leading to feelings of exclusion, loneliness, and abandonment. At the same time, not accepting one's self also has a negative effect on one's sense of belonging. Many people will work to improve their external relationships to find that feeling of belonging. However, if we focus on improving the internal relationship with ourselves, there is a sense of freedom and contentment that allows us to go out into the world, confident in who we are. A strong sense of self-worth results in better judgement when forming meaningful relationships, which further strengthens our concept of self. Belonging to ourselves fosters belonging more broadly, and true belonging is achieved, the people who deserve to be a part of your life will reveal themselves and celebrate the authentic person you are. Inspired by ideas found in Brené Brown's *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* and the 2012 video game *Journey*, I explore the concept of true belonging through the medium of dance performance, highlighting the connection between inward and outward senses of belonging, and sharing the idea of true belonging with a wider audience.

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## Introduction

The first experience I had with Brené Brown's *Braving the Wilderness* was during my sophomore year at Otterbein. The lessons and ideas about belonging, loneliness, fear, courage, and other crucial human experiences that Brown puts at the forefront of her book are so astute, yet entirely understandable, such as, "Courage is forged in pain, but not in all pain. Pain that is denied or ignored becomes fear or hate. Anger that is never transformed becomes resentment and bitterness" (Brown, 69). Because *Braving the Wilderness* is first and foremost a self-help book, Brown must elucidate some of the most complex elements of the human experience in order for her readers to take the lessons she presents and use them in their own lives. Her thoughts on loneliness and belonging were especially poignant for me, at a time when I was feeling disconnected from myself. Intellectually, I understood and, viscerally, I connected with Brown's ideas, but it took some time to implement these ideas in my own life. Over the course of my sophomore year, by allowing the guidance offered in *Braving the Wilderness* to be absorbed, I found a way back to myself, which helped me overcome obstacles and thrive. After my first reading, I put the book aside and focused on living in the present and "belonging to [myself]... - to brav[ing] the wilderness of uncertainty, vulnerability, and criticism" (Brown, 32). Then, as I was searching for an idea for my distinction project, I found myself picking up *Braving the Wilderness* again, and inspiration struck. I saw the artistic potential of the book as an exploration of human resilience. As Brown points out herself, "Art has the power to render sorrow beautiful, make loneliness a shared experience, and transform despair into hope...the magic of all art [is] the ability to both capture our pain and deliver us from it at the same time" (Brown, 44). To execute the artistic interpretation of Brown's work, I decided to use the medium of dance.

In musical theatre, it is taught that whenever a character does something on stage, they are doing it in pursuit of an objective or something they desperately desire. When the character's emotions grow too large for normal speech, they burst into song, and when singing isn't enough, they break into dance. In this hierarchy, dance is the highest form of emotional expression. As a dancer, I have experienced how dance and movement can pierce the heart and profoundly affect an audience. Intense, grand emotions like love, grief, ecstasy, can be difficult to explain using words, but when presented in dance, we can immediately recognize and connect with those emotions. Dance is a heightened form of body language, where even the slightest movement can explain what a person may be thinking or feeling at that very moment. *Braving the Wilderness* tackles a lot of these intrinsic human feelings, none more so than the idea of belonging. Brown explains that when people desire belonging "They want to be a part of something – to experience real connection with others – but not at the cost of their authenticity, freedom, or power" (Brown, 33). While we all want to belong, Brown describes a higher plane of belonging that is the central focus of her book: *true* belonging. In her own words: "True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn't require you to *change* who you are; it requires you to *be* who you are" (Brown, 40). It is this complex and fascinating concept that I knew had to be explored through dance, because it is such a grand idea, and our bodies can help us to explain what words cannot.

### **The Video Game**

Before I began dancing, I needed to return to my other source material: the 2012 video game *Journey*. *Journey*, developed by thatgamecompany and published by Sony Computer



Entertainment, is a game where a nomad travels across a vast desert trying to reach the peak of a distant mountain. Along the way, you solve puzzles and overcome obstacles on your path to the mountain peak, interacting with the world by sending out a circle of light from your person which then activates things that help you solve the puzzles. There is also a chance of running into another player along the way. This other player can help you with these puzzles and obstacles, or they can choose to simply observe you and move along their own path. The added element of this player-to-player connection is that you cannot verbally communicate with this other character, only through movement and body language. It is almost like a dance between the players, as you interact in this sprawling desert world. They may join in your dance for just a moment or stay with you until you both reach the end of the road.

There is no fighting in this world, as the game is focused on self-discovery and self-reliance. That does not mean there aren't dangers along the way; those who wish to cut your journey short. To protect yourself, you build up your own personal armor: a scarf that grows longer and longer as you find more swatches of fabric in the desert. The longer your scarf, the more you are able to do; its main function is to help you fly to reach high places for the puzzles and obstacles. As you approach the mountain, more threats appear that can cut your scarf short, making your path more difficult. Once you reach the mountain and begin ascending to the peak, the air shifts from airy, dry desert to a biting, cold mountain side, full of thick snowbanks and whipping wind. Where once it was easy to traverse, travelling is difficult in the bitter headwinds, becoming so difficult and freezing cold that you fall over in the snow, frozen, and die. Then in a moment of brilliance, the lights shift and you soar to the top of the mountain, flying freely and gloriously into the sunlight, surrounded by fellow nomads such as yourself, all of whom have taken the same journey as you.

While playing through the game again in preparation for this project, I realized just how much the human experience is expertly woven into such a simple, beautiful game. You can learn about relationships, solitude, perseverance, higher powers and goals, and even death. The scarf being cut is like losing a part of your identity, that then takes time to rebuild. You learn how to fend for yourself as you navigate not being hurt by enemies along the path. You find solace even in the face of death, continuing to climb the mountain. Most importantly, you develop a greater understanding of inextricable human connection, as you continue to connect to other players on your journey, even as you both die, as I was lucky enough to experience in my play through.

Inextricable human connection is another highlight in *Braving the Wilderness*. Brown describes how this connection affects us constantly, saying:

“That connection – the spirit that flows between us and every other human in the world – is not something that can be broken; however, *our belief in the connection* is constantly tested and repeatedly severed. When our belief that there’s something greater than us, something rooted in love and compassion, breaks, we are more likely to retreat to our bunkers, to hate from afar, to tolerate bullshit, to dehumanize others, and, ironically, to stay out of the wilderness...our belief in inextricable human connection is one of our most renewable sources of courage in the wilderness...When we don’t believe in an unbreakable connection, the isolation of the wilderness is too daunting so we stay in our factions and echo chambers.” (Brown, 117-118)

Playing the game, it is not difficult to see just how vital this kind of connection is, as you literally brave the wilderness of the desert, and put this resource to the test. The connection shows itself best in the finale of the game, when you connect with the other nomads who have taken this journey before you. You pass by each of them, knowing that each travelled the same path you did, all unique, but fundamentally sharing the same experience, immediately connecting us all to one another. At the very end of the game, you become a literal beacon of light that streams across the sky, similar to streams of light that had been coming from the mountain since the beginning of the journey. As the game returns to the title screen, you see the light streaming

from the mountain, and you realize that each stream of light that appears on the journey represents another nomad who has finished their pilgrimage. It is a beautiful cycle, showing how we are all interconnected. Seeing these two worlds collide sparked my creativity, and excited me to dive deeper into the project. I was ready to begin figuring out the story of the dance concert. One question came up first, however. What music would I dance to? Luckily, the answer was obvious, as the music of *Journey* is so dynamic and conducive to narrative that I knew I had to use the video game's soundtrack.

### **The Music**

Expertly composed by Austin Wintory, the music of *Journey* is essential to the storytelling of the game. Because there is no verbal communication in the game, music pairs with the movement to tell the story. Every moment of the game is orchestrated, with the music rising and falling with the action of the story, and it is thrilling to listen to and experience as you play the game. There is a beautiful synchronicity between the story and the music, as the orchestra responds to the player's moves. Wintory uses an orchestral score, with a strong use of strings, especially cello, which he relates to the game, saying "Musically it's like a big cello concerto where you are the soloist and all the rest of the instruments represent the world around you, including other players" (Nofi, *TheSixthAxis*). Wintory creates a dynamic score playing with tempo, volume, and complexity to match the situations in the story. In 2012, *Journey* became the first, and as of 2020 the only, video game in history to receive a Grammy nomination for its soundtrack (Pinchefsky, *Forbes Magazine*; Banas, *Push Square*), which validates the impact of Wintory's work. He even discussed his own discoveries when composing the score, saying "We all love to throw around clichés like 'life is about the journey, not the destination,' but I don't think I had ever truly internalized that until working on this game....It was the perfect

culmination of everything in my life up until that point, and I believe the perfect prelude to whatever new mountain lies over the next hill” (Wintory, *Bandcamp*).

The soundtrack is made up of eighteen different tracks, which clocks in at just under an hour of music. Ambitiously, I originally thought of choreographing the entirety of the album, but I realized that the story I wanted to tell would be more impactful and resonant if I chose the essential pieces of music that I needed. Because the album followed the storyline of the video game, it was easier to pare down from beginning to end which songs I wanted to use and still feel as though I had a cohesive through-line in the music. Most of the soundtrack feels very free and out of time, save a few pieces like “The Road of Trials” and “Apotheosis,” so it allowed me the freedom to explore the nuances Wintory has woven into his score to highlight the different parts of the journey. Once I was confident in the music I had chosen, I was ready to tackle my next challenge: further research into the psychology of belonging.

### **The Research**

I first began with my three preliminary source materials: *Braving the Wilderness*, *Journey*, and Abraham H. Maslow’s article “A Theory of Human Motivation,” which was recommended to me by my second advisor Dr. Meredith C. Frey when discussing my project with her. I analyzed all three, seeing how they overlapped and differed in thoughts on belonging and human connection. Armed with a solid grasp of these three sources, I began researching further material about the psychology of belonging. Using the online OneSearch database from Otterbein’s library, I quickly found many articles and studies that concerned belonging that would supplement the knowledge I had from *Braving the Wilderness* and Maslow’s “A Theory of Human Motivation.” I also knew I would need time to fully absorb and understand the material I was researching, so I began my research in early June of 2019, and continued my

research through my rehearsal process in the fall semester. The articles were varied in their discussion of belonging, focusing on different aspects like belonging in college, in romantic relationships, in relation to time and age, in relation to identity, and in comparison to other human experiences like loneliness. I found one article that was similar to *Braving the Wilderness* which discussed the true self: Strohminger et al's 2017 article "The True Self: A Psychological Concept Distinct From the Self." From this article, I gained a deeper understanding of belonging as a psychological concept, which develops imperceptibly. For example, when we feel a sense of belonging, we do not think about it in the moment we feel it, and we do not "remember those instances that helped us gain our current sense of belonging – they merely become part and parcel of the overall sense of belonging that we experience. The memory that is enacted in the present 'no longer *represents* our past to us, it *acts* it' (Bergson, 1988 [1896]: 82, emphases in original)" (May, 2017, 406-407). It resonated with me to think about how we experience the feeling of belonging, and I found it very true that when we feel as though we belong, we do not think about what moments helped us to achieve that sense of belonging. It is more important that we just know and feel we belong in the present moment. This is just one example of the insights I gained when researching this project.

I also attempted to research belonging in my own discipline, but came up surprisingly short, only finding one such piece of research: a dance titled "Belonging" by choreographers Ben Wright and David Hernandez for the Skånes Dansteater in Sweden in 2018. Though there was not much available about the project apart from one video interview. The video highlighted the choreography, which had a simple, pedestrian nature. This made sense to me, as belonging is a deep-seated human experience, so I incorporated the quality of movement from Wright and Hernandez into the creation of my work.

Once I had done the bulk of the research, I was ready to incorporate what I had learned into the story and dances I would portray on stage.

### **The Story**

From the beginning of the project, I knew the basic premise of the story I wanted to tell. It would follow one person as they experience all that life has to offer, and how these experiences shape the way they perceive themselves and the world around them. As their self-image begins to distort, they find their way to a moment of enlightenment: an understanding of what it means to truly belong. The pieces themselves would further elaborate on this story, tackling certain experiences or themes such as love, depression, naivete, and fear. I also knew to tell the story I wanted to tell, I would need other dancers. I had contemplated just choreographing and not dancing the piece, but after further reflection and talking to Stella about my ideas, I decided that since the story itself was somewhat autobiographical, expressing my experiences with belonging, so I wanted to bring it to life. I had decided to have two other dancers join me, and I chose fellow Otterbein students Amelia Elias and Rachel Fish. Both had danced my choreography before, I trusted them, and they were two of the best dancers currently at Otterbein, so I was very happy when they agreed to join me on my distinction project.

Who Rachel and Amelia represented, however, took some time for me to discern. Originally, they were exclusively people I would encounter along the way that affect my self-perception. Friends, enemies, lovers, strangers – characters who would come and go in my life to teach me something about myself or change the way I see the world. As I continued to choreograph and the story was evolving, Stella noticed that they seemed like extensions of myself. Physical manifestations of my essence, teaching me about every part of myself. I was really interested in this idea, but struggled to incorporate it, at first. I was worried that because I

still had them playing other characters in the story, the audience would be confused if Rachel and Amelia also were extensions of myself. However, as I choreographed new sections, their roles became more clear, and the idea of Rachel and Amelia simultaneously portraying me and other people began to work. These two versions of the characters could exist at the same time because they had the same goal: to help me discover what it means to truly belong. As my dancers' roles became clearer, so did mine, as both a choreographer and a dancer. I began to understand how I first interacted with Amelia and Rachel, and why they came into the space. They are there to guide me along my life path, and each has different ways of helping me. Rachel represents softer aspects of myself like tenderness, love, joy, and fun, so I connected with her sooner in the story because it was easier and more comfortable to be with her. Amelia is tougher, representing intellect, strength, struggle, perseverance, and fear; parts of myself I did not feel as comfortable with at the beginning of the story, but come to embrace her and understand just how important those aspects are too. As their characters continued to evolve throughout the story, I realized they were like nature versus nurture. I then took this idea one step further and saw them as similar to the left brain and the right brain. They were not competing to see which would help me discover who I truly was first, they always worked together, like a brain. Though I might default to one side of my brain more often, the whole brain is still working to achieve the same goal. Along that line, Rachel and Amelia had different approaches to teaching me what life was about and how to accept myself, but they were never working at cross purposes. They were a team, because they were working to help me, which in turn was helping themselves since they are extensions of me. It was thrilling to see it work as the whole concert began to take shape – it was like I was meeting parts of myself for the first time, like I was meeting a new person, which felt like a watershed moment. It was satisfying to incorporate that kind of energy into the project.

## The Choreography

Having now completed the majority of my research on belonging, and having the rehearsal schedule set, I began working on the choreography. I had forty minutes of music to choreograph, the biggest project I had ever taken on, and I was ready for the challenge. For much of the concert, I choreographed in the room on the day of the rehearsal, having specific images I wanted to display, but not knowing exactly how I would arrive at those images. I am more used to pre-planning and coming in with some movement already set, but with a subject as delicate and complex as belonging, I knew the movement had to come from a very organic, vulnerable place. Furthermore, because I was incorporating two other dancers along with myself, I knew it would be more effective to create in the rehearsal room. Amelia and Rachel were wonderful collaborators who were very willing to experiment with me, and assist me with their own ideas when I would face a choreographic road block. We had to have terrific synchronicity in both mind and body in order for the story to work, and that is exactly what we achieved. The story would have lost much of its impact without their vital talents and contributions.

I would typically choreograph one piece of music per rehearsal period, later as the pieces began to flow into one another more naturally, I would work on multiple pieces in one session. After narrowing down and choosing the songs I wanted to use from the *Journey* soundtrack, I had nine songs to weave into one cohesive story. As I mentioned in the music section, the album's soundtrack follows the order in which the player hears and experiences them in the video game, which helped to frame the narrative I was creating. I worked chronologically through the concert, leaving the third song, "The Road of Trials," for last as it was the tap dance of the concert, so I knew I would need more time to ruminate on how to achieve telling the story



through the intricacy of my tap choreography. Therefore, I began with the first track on the album which would open the concert: “Nascence.”

### **Nascence**

Nascence is defined as “just coming into existence and beginning to display signs of future potential” (New Oxford American Dictionary). My approach to this piece was to introduce a motif of movement that represented belonging as a whole. I knew I would return to this motif as the story progressed, so I wanted to make it just right. As “Nascence” was the beginning, I wanted to introduce my character as someone who was not concerned with belonging because they had not yet needed to think about it. They were happy to just be a part of the world, carefree and joyful. I thought about this piece as a representation of early childhood, where children do whatever they want to because they want to do it. They feel no pressure to fit in, so they are just themselves. A child’s joy is palpable, and I wanted to start at this place of self-love so that as the piece progressed, I would have something to fight for when my self-image was distorted. I would fight to get back to the sense of belonging and joy I had at the beginning of the concert. This concept allowed me to outline and plan how the other pieces would fit to serve this story.

I began exploring movement, first starting with finding where the feeling of belonging lived in my body. To do this, I thought about the opposite feeling of loneliness. I felt the lack of belonging in my gut, my solar plexus, and in my heart. The feeling was deep, centralized, and radiated outwards to the rest of my body. In the 2018 study “Belonging across the lifetime: Time and self in Mass Observation accounts” by Vanessa May, May describes how at different stages of life, our experiences with belonging change. In twenty to thirty-year olds, as they begin to experience events like college, leaving home, getting a job, and starting a family, May found that

they “are concerned with the changes that their sense of belonging is or has been undergoing as they transition to adulthood... Such constant change can lead to belonging being experienced as temporary....These are accounts about change and turmoil... [as] the emphasis is often on *belonging* (Probyn 1996), on striving for and seeking a sense of belonging” (May, 2018). As a twenty-something, I keenly understand these feelings May describes in her research of these Mass Observation accounts. In early adulthood, change is practically a constant. New experiences can appear every day, personally and professionally. That pang of longing or yearning to belong hits in a profound way, and it is difficult to forget. When we find something or somebody that removes that feeling, we desperately want to hold on to it for fear of feeling that pang again. Therefore, in my signature motif of belonging, I created movement that felt to me as though the void was filled and presented confidence and contentment. Drawing energy from the ground, representing my belonging to the world, and connecting to Brené Brown’s titular wilderness, I moved my hands up my leg to my chest, bursting them up and outward from my center, displaying my desire to give my authentic self to the universe. I end with my hand on my heart, my head up, with a wide lunge as a base, physicalizing Brown’s concept true belonging.

Once I had found the signature motif, I went back to the start of the piece and played with movements I enjoyed doing as a dancer. Performing in the way I liked to move helped to capture the child-like element I wanted this piece to demonstrate. I explored spinning, jumping, falling – anything that brought me joy. I wanted it to show ease in the movement, so I focused on creating movements that flowed seamlessly together. The use of a constant flow of movement was indicative of self-assurance, confidence, and freedom. Moving with confidence and with purpose shows a strong sense of self and self-confidence, and with that self-confidence

comes joy. The joy experienced here is juvenile and innocent. As the title alludes, this is only the beginning, as the two other characters will tell me in the next piece. In “Nascence,” they appear, doing similar movements to me to indicate that they are a part of me. It is not entirely clear who or what Rachel and Amelia represent when they enter, but they are interesting and capture the attention of the audience, who want to know why these two have appeared. I do not notice them, as I am living in ignorant bliss in this first piece. They will help to open my eyes to what the world has in store for me.

### **The Call**

From “Nascence,” I went immediately into “The Call,” which begins with a discovery of Rachel and Amelia’s characters. The goal of this piece was to give a more formal introduction to the two external parts of myself, as well as show me some of the possibilities of where I could belong, and what I could be up against as I am on my way to true belonging. I wanted the piece to follow the childhood theme and explore the idea of first friendships. I interacted with each of them individually, showcasing their personalities through the movement: Rachel and I doing gentler, softer movements, and Amelia and I focusing on more athletic, grand movements. They were brief interactions, as I wanted to show a taste of later pieces, when I would have a duet with each of them individually. Even the smallest touch can have a huge impact on us, as interactions like “making eye contact, shaking someone’s hand, or giving someone a high-five lowers your cortisone level and releases dopamine, making you less stressed and providing a little chemical boost” (Brown, 141). In childhood, it can be intimidating and scary to make new friends, so even a small physical connection helps to make you feel at ease, or like you belong.

The two of them then came together and ran to each of the far aisles in the theatre to demonstrate some of the paths I could choose on the road to belonging. The first aisle

represented hardship and struggle, which I portrayed as dealing with bullies and encountering people who want to hurt you. Those who would do anything to make sure you know that you do not belong. The second aisle represented social isolation and people who do not give you the attention or relationship you want from them. Social isolation can lead to deep feelings of loneliness, and current societal trends of social interaction reinforce this idea of isolation. As Ami Rokach writes in her 2011 article “From Loneliness to Belonging: A Review,” “We yearn for close, intimate relationships, but social conditions today are not conducive to the development of human relations. Our present lifestyle, which was developed in the last 25 years, creates and reinforces isolation, making loneliness even more difficult to cope with” (Rokach, 75). Choreographically, I used shrinking, contorted movement to express the isolation people may feel when others they care about disregard and ignore them. Here is where I also introduced my one and only set piece, a block. This block would become a home base of sorts for Rachel and Amelia to return to when they were observers of my pilgrimage, allowing me to learn about true belonging without assistance or interference. It became a vantage point to watch my every move, and a location where it was clearly visible that the three of us were always tethered together; all on the same team, achieving the same goal.

Then, with a shift of the music, I ran towards the center aisle, where Rachel and Amelia then chased me and pulled me back to center stage. They proceeded to do a series of choreography that would become another motif of the concert. The center aisle represented “The Call” – it was the path that I felt destined to walk down to find the belonging I craved. I was pulled back from running up this center aisle because these external parts of myself needed to explain what this path would entail. It would lead to that place of true belonging and joy, but it required me to be the most vulnerable version of myself. As Brown states, “Vulnerability is the

birthplace of love, joy, trust, intimacy, courage – everything that brings meaning to our life” (Brown, 153). But with this great freedom comes instability, which Rachel and Amelia’s characters explain to me. The instability is the “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” that vulnerability can bring about (Brown, 154). However, learning to live in our vulnerability, we find greater strength and courage than we ever thought possible. The new motif choreography Rachel and Amelia then do displays the freedom I will feel on this path, but they also request a sacrifice for walking this path. I have very little to offer, so I give them my shirt, which seals my fate and begins my pilgrimage. In return they give me a pair of socks, a gift that offers some protection on my journey, and a knowledge that these parts of myself are with me at all times. I also was given socks for a practical reason, as I needed to put on my tap shoes for the next piece. Therefore, as I put on my socks, Rachel and Amelia excitedly move around the stage, flying my shirt as a flag of freedom. Now I found myself in my most vulnerable state thus far: shirtless, alone, and uncertain of what was to come. I had taken my first step into the wilderness to find true belonging.

I then turned and saw Amelia and Rachel offering me another gift – tap shoes. The introduction of the tap shoes was a difficult moment to choreograph, as it needed to be story driven as well as functional as I had to put on my tap shoes, which is not very engaging for an audience. I tried doing it alone, with Rachel and Amelia watching, finally landing on them presenting the shoes to me in a ceremonial fashion, continuing to strengthen our relationship. Then, having my shoes on, Rachel and Amelia quite literally throw me in to the next section of the concert, jumpstarting my pilgrimage to true belonging.

## The Road of Trials

“The Road of Trials” was the most challenging piece to choreograph to achieve the story I wanted to tell. Unlike the rest of the concert, this piece had to be choreographed very precisely, as tap dance is very intricate. Ironically, though tap dance as an art form embraces improvisation readily, tap performances have some of the most detailed choreography a dancer will ever encounter. Adding a story on top of that, I made sure to take time to plan out exactly what I wanted to do. The music is very quick and syncopated, and I wanted to match the syncopation to the sounds I would make with my tap shoes, so there was a lot of trial and error figuring out what would match, and even juxtapose, the music.

The story I wanted to tell began with focusing on the idea of the trial, or test. Rachel and Amelia had given me a gift, my tap shoes, and now were going to present different challenges to me to see how I would overcome them. In René Girard’s *Belonging*, he explains how the idea of a trial has related to belonging for centuries:

“...all social relationships of belonging originate in ritual and sacrifice. Indeed, that is why, in archaic societies, such relationships depend on what are known as *rites of initiation* or *rites of passage*. Candidates are put through trials that recreate the original mimetic crisis and its victimary resolution. In prevailing over such trials, the candidates demonstrate that they will be able to overcome the crises that await them and are worthy of belonging to the culture that initiates them” (Girard, 8).

The ideas presented by Girard align with the creators of *Journey*, as this is one of the first songs a player experiences on the road towards the mountain peak far in the distance. All of this put together created a theme that would focus my choreography. I would use the choreography as a way to demonstrate the importance of overcoming obstacles and hardship in order to discover more about yourself and true belonging. As Brown says, “If we’re going to make true belonging a daily practice in our lives, we’re going to need a strong back and a soft front. We’ll need both

courage and vulnerability as we abandon the certainty and safety of our ideological bunkers and head off into the wilderness” (Brown, 148). “The Road of Trials” is the first step into actively braving the wilderness.

The first section of “The Road of Trials” represented finding your voice and celebrating that voice loudly and proudly. This was another autobiographical aspect I incorporated, as tap dance was the way I began my career as an artist, so it was an important moment for me to share in the story, as that was one of the first recognizable moments that I felt like I belonged to something. Then, just as I am finding freedom in sharing who I am with the world, Amelia and Rachel grip my legs and root me to the floor, silencing me. As they are a part of me, it was not out of malice that they silenced me, but they did it to challenge me and teach me what to do when someone tries to silence me. Now trapped, I had to come up with a way to let my voice be heard, so I started snapping my fingers instead of tapping my feet. I found a new way to share myself authentically, so Rachel and Amelia let me go, having overcome the first trial.

The second trial encompassed a lost sense of belonging. The goal was to further forge the relationships I had made with the external parts of myself, but they had other plans. As I continued to reach out to them, Amelia’s personality came through, displaying her tough love side, keeping Rachel away from me, pushing me back into the world, and performing one of the motifs of this piece: tracing a line with the side of her hand along my spine. The movement here represented one the key elements of true belonging: a strong back. Therefore, as I felt abandoned by these parts of myself and a lost sense of belonging, my external selves were helping me to learn what it means to have a strong back. As I spiraled away from Rachel and Amelia, exploring what this strong back might mean, I returned to the main belonging motif as a reminder that I still belong to the world and myself whether or not other people are interested in

belonging with me. With that knowledge, I set forward on my path, allowing my strong back to grow with every step, which led me to my next trial.

The third trial focused on those who try to distract you from your goals and pull you off the path you are on. As I move forward slowly and steadily on the path I have chosen, Rachel and Amelia come forward, acting as friends who bond through gossip and hatred. Brené Brown comments on this idea of friendship, saying how “we’ve simply started hanging out with people who hate the same people we do. That’s not connection. That’s ‘you’re either with us or against us.’ That’s common enemy intimacy...counterfeit connection and the opposite of true belonging” (Brown, 136). As these trials challenge me, Rachel and Amelia show me the opposite of what I truly desire, even if it looks like a simpler way to belonging. They distract me from my desire, and literally throw me off of my path, leaving me dazed and confused, which then leads to the discovery that I am lost. I experience another moment of vulnerability, lost and unsure, which tests my inner resolve and self-reliance. Here the tap becomes an afterthought. I am searching for a way back to the path I was on, letting the taps naturally make sound as a result of my walking. As I continue to feel lost, I stumble upon Amelia, curled up in a ball alone as Rachel is hidden behind the box. Seeing Amelia, even in my moment of doubt, I find myself drawn to her, wanting to help her through her troubles through bonds of trust instead of bonds of hatred. I place a hand on her shoulder, leading to a hug, which then begins a new friendship with a kindred spirit. Again in this section of the piece, I reinforce the idea that small touches have deep significance on our well-being. For example, “Students who received a supportive touch on the back or arm from a teacher were nearly twice as likely to volunteer in class as those who did not...[and] a massage from a loved one can not only ease pain but also soothe depression and strengthen a relationship” (Carey, *The New York Times*, 2010). A simple touch is all it takes



sometimes to help someone to feel better, and to know that they belong as well. Amelia and Rachel taught me this by putting me through the trials on my pilgrimage. Everything I experienced in these trials was done to help me build a strong back, which meant learning how to lean into vulnerability with steadfast convictions and a strong sense of self. Through choreographing “The Road of Trials,” I connected the adage of “everything happens for a reason” into the narrative. I would not have learned the lessons I did without being thrown off of my path and feeling lost. Though highly vulnerable and frightening at times, it can and will lead to where we are meant to be, and the joy we all deserve to have. The reason I am an artist is to share joy with the world, and I try to lead a joyful life, which coincides with Brown’s thoughts on joy: “. . . joy matters. . . . we’re also working to make sure everyone gets to experience what brings meaning to life: love, belonging, and joy. These are essential, irreducible needs for all of us. And we can’t give people what we don’t have. We can’t fight for what’s not in our hearts” (Brown, 156).

Amelia and I, now fast friends, leap into a quick duet that displays synchronicity and a shared zest for life, leading Rachel to jump in and pull me away from Amelia, wanting to share in my positive spirit. This leads to a shorter fourth trial, the last in the piece. This trial concerns what happens when others take advantage of you. “It’s hard to stay kind-hearted when you feel people are taking advantage of you” (Brown, 71), which can also eat away at your self-worth. It is wonderful to be helpful, but there must come a time when you recognize when this helpful energy is doing more harm than good to yourself, and break away. Amelia and Rachel take turns trying to claim me for themselves, to which I finally do break away, bruised and fatigued, to regain my own inner strength, celebrating all I have achieved to be where I am in this moment. As I take the final celebratory tap choreography around the edge of the stage, Rachel places

herself at the far edge of my path, who will stop me dead in my tracks. She is preparing me for my most vulnerable experience yet: love.

### **Temptations**

“Temptations” was the piece that I had a clear vision for from the beginnings of the project. The story would follow the experience of love at first sight, the exploration of different facets of attraction and love both alone and with another person, and, finally, the experience of heartbreak when the love interest no longer has interest in me. The euphoric high of being in love with someone juxtaposed with the despair of a first heartbreak would teach me a lot about belonging, with the latter affecting my psyche and sense of self in unexpected ways.

“Temptations” is also where I would incorporate theories of the human need for love from Abraham H. Maslow’s quintessential 1943 paper “A Theory of Human Motivation,” where Maslow introduced his famous Hierarchy of Needs. In it, Maslow explains humans are compelled to act and achieve goals because we have a desire to satisfy five basic needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs. Concerning the love needs, Maslow says this: “He will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal. He will want to attain such a place more than anything else in the world and may even forget that once, when he was hungry, he sneered at love” (Maslow, 1943). Love is another way of feeling as though we belong, for when we are loved by someone, it is easier for us to see ourselves in a good light, because someone else acknowledges our worth. Early in *Braving the Wilderness*, Brené Brown says: “Never underestimate the power of being seen – it’s exhausting to keep working against yourself when someone truly sees you and loves you” (Brown, 17). Love has immense power, and with this power can come euphoria and pain.

I began frozen in place staring at Rachel from afar, allowing myself to melt to the floor as I was flooded with the overwhelming emotions of love at first sight. I took an approach choreographically to slowly approach her, as if I were a wildlife photographer careful to not startle an animal in their natural habitat. Embracing this connection, I decided to choreograph a moment where I did scare Rachel. I still had my tap shoes on, so I made a sound with my tap shoe, forcing Rachel to dash across to the other side of the stage, as I quickly removed my tap shoes and socks as to not risk scaring her again. Not ready to approach yet, I moved to the back wall and writhed around, exploring the overwhelming feelings I was experiencing. Amelia came and touched different parts of my body, causing me to react and move based on those touches, kind of like she was activating these parts of my body. In my experience, love can inundate our bodies with so many different sensations simultaneously, and I wanted to show that in the choreography, allowing my body to react naturally to each sensation and flow seamlessly from one to the next. Unable to withstand my tethering to Rachel, I peel myself off the wall and rush forward to meet her, where we stand face to face, taking each other in for the first time. After a significant moment staring into one another's eyes, a very vulnerable experience, the connection is sparked, and our duet begins, returning and expanding upon our motif from "The Call." Our love begins to grow, and as it is my first love, it is a thrilling experience. In a 2018 study concerning self-other discrimination in romantic relationships, Meixner and Herbert explain why love appears in our lives:

“[L]ove emanates from a basic need of the self to grow and expand by incorporating the other into one's own mental representation and concept of the self [39]. The expansion of one's own self when in love is assumed to be an affectively positive experience for many if not all lovers [40,41] facilitating a positivity bias for positive aspects of the partner [25]. This positive bias towards the other is considered to be functional, self-serving and may predict relationship satisfaction [42].” (Meixner and Herbert, 3)

The study found that people in romantic relationships have a higher self-positivity bias than those not in a romantic relationship, meaning that they could ascribe positive traits to themselves better when experiencing romantic love (Meixner and Herbert, 8-14). I wanted to show these positive traits and the joy it brought me to be in love through the choreography, so through working with Rachel we created fun and exciting choreography to tell the love story. For example, we come in and out of sync with one another, lift each other, share each other's weight, chase each other around the space, and play with the negative space around each other's bodies. I also played with simplicity and complexity in "Temptations," as love can feel both simple and complex. There are grander romantic gestures like embraces, kissing, and sex, but even something as simple as sitting back to back has a captivating intimacy and appeal, so I made sure to touch on both extremes of affection. I strived to create choreography that was sensual without being overtly sexual, gentle yet passionate, as well as carefree yet deliberate. The choreography needed to have these complexities, otherwise I felt as though I would not be representing love accurately. I also wanted to be sure to touch on exploring sexuality, as this was a large part of discovering my sense of belonging as a gay man. The exploration began at the back wall earlier and culminated with a brief solo in the middle of the piece, I focused the movement instigating from my chest and from my pelvis, the two centers where love and lust live. Being gay, growing up it can be difficult to explore your sexuality when you do not feel the same freedom that your heterosexual peers have to date someone, so when that freedom is found, it is euphoric and held onto as tightly as possible. However, I did not want to turn this piece into a dance about coming out, as that is not what I was focused on. The universality of love is what was more important to me. As a result, while I got to choreograph an idea of what that freedom of exploring sexuality can feel like, it didn't become about someone being gay: it was about a person falling in love.

As the piece progressed, and my character fell further in love with Rachel, Rachel became more disinterested and distant, without any clear explanation. The definition of temptation comes into the story in this moment: “the desire to do something, especially something wrong or unwise” (New Oxford American Dictionary). As Rachel became more distant, it hurt more and more out of fear of losing her, so I became more desperate in trying to connect with her and get her to stay, really playing with the negative space and the use of less aesthetic partner work. It has now become unwise for me to pursue the relationship with Rachel, though I continue nonetheless. The desperation and desire for her to stay ends with Rachel pushing me down with her foot, and walking away from the relationship, leaving me alone and lost once again. Rachel’s job in this piece was to teach me the lesson about love and loss. Her intention was not to hurt me for the sake of hurting me, but to let me go because she knew that it is what was best for me, and it would help me grow the most and find my true self. She knew there would be pain, but pain is necessary for growth. “When we own our emotion,” Brené Brown says, “we can rebuild and find our way through the pain” (Brown, 67). Though she did not want to leave me, Rachel knew she had to. Amelia then draws her back so that I can experience this next part of my pilgrimage on my own. I am left confused and with a greater sense of longing than I had ever experienced before. Rachel had broken my heart, which leads to my “Descent.”

### **Descent**

Still taking in what had just occurred in “Temptations,” I pick myself up off the floor and grab at the air where Rachel had just been. The hollow feeling of heartbreak begins to well up in my body, specifically in my solar plexus, which is where our sense of self is thought to live in the meditation tool of chakras. Desperate to have her back with me, I rush to where Rachel just

left, only to be slapped from afar by Amelia, catching me completely off guard. Not understanding what happened, and still deeply yearning for the love and connection I just lost, I try again, this time being hit by both Rachel and Amelia, leading me to tremor and collapse to the floor, unsure of what I am experiencing. Slowly, after trembling more as a representation of overstimulation, I try again to reach back towards Rachel, but my body is at war with itself, with one half reaching towards Rachel and one half reaching away. Fighting a losing battle, I begin to limp away from Rachel and continue on my path, trying to overcome and carry the extra weight I now feel on my body. I finally stand up, saddened by what I can no longer have, and exhausted for spending so much energy on my love for Rachel. I no longer recognize myself. I feel insecure in my body, my actions, and how I exist in the world. I use twisted, contorted, and grotesque choreography to highlight the new mental space I am living with. As I continue to spiral further into my own depression, I circle my upper body faster and faster, finally centering myself as my sadness turns to rage. I have reached my boiling point, wanting to hurt Rachel for hurting me, but just as I approach the same area she left from, I slow. As much as I want to release my anger, the feelings of love I still have mix with this anger, leaving me stumbling and desperate for any source of connection. As the desperation exhausts me, I throw myself one final time towards Rachel's exit, exert any inklings of feeling I left, and collapse to the floor.

The first goal of "Descent" was to choreograph what a heartbreak could feel like. Love carries with it some of the strongest, most potent feelings humanity can experience, and first loves further heighten these emotions, especially when you consider that most first loves are experienced in adolescence or early adulthood, when emotions can be more unpredictable. A significant relationship like the one I was cultivating in "Temptations" can have a large impact on how a person perceives themselves. Ami Rokach explains how society currently perceives

the importance of relationships, saying, “Ours is the age of relationships. We believe in the importance, uniqueness, and availability of ways of relating to others, thinking that we know how to conquer the barriers against closeness that we ourselves have erected. At present, relationships appear to be the main avenue, and perhaps the only means by which self-esteem can truly be affirmed” (Rokach, 74). “Descent” displays how a relationship I chose to cultivate significantly affected the perception of myself. I chose to pursue my love with Rachel, and while it had great benefit to me, when she leaves I am left alone with my thoughts, and I feel frustrated, pained, and less than ideal. As Brown acknowledges, “Pain is unrelenting. It will get our attention. Despite our attempts to drown it in addiction, to physically beat it out of one another, to suffocate it with success and material trappings, or to strangle it with our hate, pain will find a way to make itself known. Pain will subside only when we acknowledge it and care for it” (Brown, 66-67). Rachel helped me learn many positive things about myself in “Temptations,” like what it means to love and care for a person, but now has left me spiraling into a dark mental state. The pain I experience will teach me just as much if not more about myself and how I want to exist in the world than the love did, but I did not know this in the moment. I was only focused on the pain.

A secondary theme of “Descent” was the incorporation of *mimetic rivalry*, discussed by René Girard in his 2004 lecture *Belonging*. Girard explains:

“We are always close to our rivals, and the more we compete with them, the more we resemble them, and the more our two identities become one and the same. If models only inspired in their imitators a desire for objects that they then agreed to share with them, violent rivalry would be avoided. What makes such rivalry inevitable is the thirst for exclusive possession, which most often characterizes the imitator’s desire precisely because it already characterizes the desire of his or her model” (5).

Because of the pain I experienced, Rachel morphs into a rival in my life, and because of mimetic rivalry, I try to possess her and become more like her. I wanted to understand why she turned against me, which is actually in the hope to help her become like the person she was when we first met. With turbulent emotions such as love and hate, it is difficult not to devote a majority of your energy to them, even when the energy is wasted on a fruitless pursuit. The energy devoted leads to mimicry of the rival, or lover, which, as I will learn, is not a healthy or productive way of making a strong connection.

As a result of this pain, the choreography becomes laborious and full of struggle to accentuate the heartbreak and inner turmoil I am experiencing. It becomes self-centered movement, with abrupt switches to an aggressive outward style when referring to Rachel. The constant shifting further represents the inner turmoil I cannot fully understand, so I move to express myself in the hopes of finding peace. There is also a connection to the five stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – within “Descent.” I did not touch upon acceptance in this section, as I was not ready to accept what had happened to me. I experience the other four in varying intensity, at an accelerated pace, throughout the course of this piece. In one final attempt for connection, I reach out to the world wanting anyone to connect with me, growing larger and more distressed as I do not achieve my goal. Expending the energy I have left, I fall to the floor, overcome by my pain. This low point is where I begin the next section, “Atonement.”

### **Atonement**

“Atonement” was another piece I had to choreograph in great detail in order to convey what this part of the pilgrimage represented. With “Atonement” being the longest piece in the concert aside from the finale, I knew I had a great opportunity to incorporate many of the ways



we feel when we do not belong. I had just explored what a lost sense of self is like in “Descent,” and because it takes time and work to find our way back to ourselves after feeling lost, I wanted “Atonement” to focus on solving the problem of feeling unrecognizable to yourself and a self-deprecating mental state. In every piece concerning struggle or hardship, but especially here, it was important for me to focus on solving a problem through the movement rather than living in an emotional state. It is easy to explore difficult emotional states like depression and grief by living in those emotions, but it is more engaging to work to find a solution. It helps to move the story along more efficiently, and it helps to bring the audience along with you. As an actor, I have learned that audiences want to root for a character that is fighting to make their lives better and not just settle for their current situation, which is also more rewarding to play as an actor. Therefore, I knew that my way into “Atonement” was to figure out how to help the audience connect to my fight and support my journey.

To start, I get myself up off the floor, hiding my face from the world, and stumbling towards Rachel and Amelia, using what little energy I have left to reach out to them for help, before collapsing again, though this time I am caught by Rachel and Amelia. Here I begin my fight against my loneliness in order to find my true self and the confidence to share it with the world. In this section, Rachel and Amelia are a representation of two ideas. First, they are friends or family who are always there for you even in moments of weakness, and second, they represent the idea that our true selves are always within us, even when we feel nothing like ourselves. Because I am living in this dark state, however, I am unable to acknowledge their help and kindness, as I am so lost in my own depression. In *Braving the Wilderness*, Brown quotes social neuroscientist John Cacioppo, who discussed how loneliness affects our bodies biologically:

“...loneliness tells us that we need social connection – something as critical to our well-being as food and water...denying you feel lonely makes no more sense than denying you feel hunger.... The brains of social species have evolved to respond to the feeling of being pushed to the social perimeter – being on the outside – by going into self-preservation mode...In that mode, we want to connect, but our brain is attempting to override connection with self-protection” (Brown, 54).

To overcome this override, Brown suggests that “we must first learn how to identify [loneliness] and have the courage to see that experience as a warning sign. Our response to that warning sign should be to find connection” (Brown, 55). And that is the crux of “Atonement:” discovering how to get out of our own way and allow ourselves to find the courage, connection, and joy we deserve. However, as previously mentioned, this process does not happen quickly, so I spend the first half of the piece exploring the dark mental state and the frustration that comes with not understanding how or why the depressive and anxious feelings will not subside, and how it can feel as though these feelings control our actions and thoughts.

As I continue to stumble with Rachel and Amelia helping me to walk, my mind is still focused on the heartbreak. Letting my loneliness lead my actions, I reach out to that same space where Rachel initially left me. Rachel and Amelia know that kindling this relationship is not what I need for my own happiness, but it represents the last time I remember living with happiness as a constant. I vie for that connection, even though it is toxic. Amelia and Rachel pull me away, but I break free of them, at war with myself between knowing that the connection I covet is not healthy, and yet still wanting the connection as I am not able to change my thought process. Nevertheless, my two halves rush to my side, take me in their arms again, lay me down on the ground, and hold me, giving me support in the hopes to ease my suffering. After a moment of stillness, I begin to feel suffocated by this newfound support, so I once again break free and attempt to escape the support I so desperately need, once again showing the inner

turmoil. Ever persistent, Amelia and Rachel catch me after I have exhausted myself, carry me backwards, and help me to my feet. In my exhaustion, I am unable to acknowledge the support they have given me, looking through each of them, to finally hit rock bottom, collapsing again after glancing back to where my love interest left me.

The repetitive use of collapse, escaping, and reaching towards my heartbreak are my way of representing insanity. In the general consciousness, insanity is thought of as doing something over and over again expecting a different result, though the same result persists. I keep trying to go back to the heartbreak thinking I can fix it, but I always end up exhausted and hurt. I keep trying because my brain is telling me that this connection will bring me joy. The necessity of connection is vital to our livelihood, as “many studies...that were conducted throughout the world have shown that those who feel lonely and depressed are many times more likely to die prematurely than those who have a strong sense of love and intimacy, connection, and community” (Rokach, 2011 citing Ornish, 2007). Turbulent emotional states like loss can lead to feelings of insanity, as we are sometimes unable to comprehend how or why our brain feels wired to do the things we are inclined to do. In my research, I found that the idea of phenomenal accessibility, as described in Ingmar Persson’s 2016 article “Parfit on Personal Identity: Its Analysis and (Un)importance,” relates to these feelings. Phenomenal accessibility is the idea that:

“...your self must be something that you are able to pick out in everyday circumstances in order to attribute your mental states to it. Such attributions are what you engage in when you say, for instance, that you perceive or think this or that. Your body meets this accessibility condition because you perceive it whenever you are conscious. Moreover, you are able to recognize your body from one day to another because it does not change dramatically during shorter periods of time. This ensures that you can attribute your mental states to the same subject from one day to the next and, thus, that your self can have numerical identity over time.” (Persson, 156)

Because we can know that our bodies exist in space at any given moment, we can attribute thoughts and feelings to those moments because our bodies, and thus our brains, were present for those moments. I took this a step further in my choreography and incorporated an opposite idea. When we are unable to recognize ourselves, figuratively, it can be more difficult to attribute thoughts and feelings that are representative of our true selves. Therefore, throughout “Atonement,” I expand upon phenomenal accessibility as I repeat my actions hoping for a way back to my true self. As I do this, Amelia and Rachel prepare to teach me another lesson about belonging: fitting in.

Fitting in may feel like belonging, but even eighth graders can recognize that the two are very different. Brené Brown actually quotes eighth grade students on their feelings on belonging versus fitting in, with it boiling down to the idea that “If I get to be me, I belong. If I have to be like you, I fit in” (Brown, 160). To demonstrate this, Rachel and Amelia show me what it is like to fit in, by doing repetitive, robotic choreography that vastly differs in style from what had been seen previously. They do the robotic movement as a way to help me choose to go my own way, hoping that the mundane quality of their movement will deter me from joining them. Now that I have begun to finally move past my sadness and grief, I do try to join along with them, but pull myself away unable to even try to fit in because I yearn for something deeper than simply fitting in. Rachel then rushes over to comfort me and allow me to continue with my grief, but Amelia steps in to take charge, knowing that it is time to solve the problem with a little tough love.

Amelia plants me center stage, returning to the poking and prodding similar to “Temptations,” finding where my lack of belonging lives, and trying to solve the problem. I stay guarded, not reacting to her touch, until she reaches my solar plexus, which unlocks my body and allows me to be vulnerable in a safe space with her. Here, I use the dual-role approach to

Amelia's character, having her represent both a part of myself and, more importantly in this moment, a friend to help me through this troubled time on the journey. She gives me the support I need, but also pushes me to make strides on my own. The human connection I receive from her is like a breath of fresh air, and is something I have felt a lack of, so now that I feel that connection, I want to take advantage of it while I have it. Her touch and connection feel healing, and she helps me to share my true feelings readily. Touch and emotion are connected, and it is possible to interpret what these touches mean, as shown in one set of experiments done at DePauw University where "volunteers tried to communicate a list of emotions by touching a blindfolded stranger...[and] were able to communicate eight distinct emotions, from gratitude to disgust to love, some with about 70 percent accuracy" (Carey, *The New York Times*, 2010). In our duet, I played with keeping and breaking physical connection with Amelia, as she pushes me to find my own strength juxtaposed with my own feeling of needing constant, tangible support. As I become more comfortable in pushing myself thanks to Amelia, she introduces me to some of the choreography in "Nascence," as a way to remind me of my true self. She coaxes me into joining her in the choreography, which leads me to a joy I have not felt or expressed since "Road of Trials." I share this joy in a unison section with Amelia, as a way of thanking her for helping me to further share my true self with the world. Now that I have more self-confidence, I can move on from my past, begin sharing my true self, and reclaim my place in the world.

### **Reclamation**

In "Reclamation," I wanted to show the continued revitalization of my true self that began to appear at the end of "Atonement" with Amelia. To do this, I decided to use the entirety of my choreography from "Nascence," and perform it in reverse. Thematically, it was familiar movement, or something that I recognized, but now seen from a new perspective to highlight my

gained wisdom. The new perspective further represented the final remnants of my clouded self-judgement becoming clear. I also used the reverse choreography as a way for Rachel and Amelia to take the lead, having them reintroduce the choreography to me. I had lost my way on my pilgrimage, so Rachel and Amelia teach me what true belonging looks like, and they use that familiar movement to show me that it has been within me all along. I just needed a reminder.

I begin by returning to the strong back motif from *Braving the Wilderness* I introduced in my choreography in “Road of Trials,” as a strong back of self-assurance is key to the creating a “wild heart” Brown hopes we all can achieve, which is a heart that is open and vulnerable, yet protected and strong. Still tentative to join back with Rachel and Amelia, thus embracing every part of myself, I shy away, only to have my two external selves rush to my side and give me the final push of support I need to return to my true self. As they begin to show me the reversed “Nascence” choreography, they drift away from me until I am dancing on my own, fully confident in myself and my actions. In “Reclamation,” I wanted to demonstrate the relationship between belonging and social support. While it is fairly obvious that family and friendships can make us feel like we belong, perceived social support can also have a positive effect on our feelings of loneliness, as it “...can buffer the negative impact of stress on psychological distress, depression, and anxiety. Additionally, social support may alleviate stress by, for example, providing a solution to the problem, or it may facilitate healthful behaviours such as exercise, personal hygiene, proper nutrition, and rest (House, 1981)” (Rokach, 75). Over the course of the “Reclamation,” Amelia and Rachel do less and less until finally they are simply watching my experiences, but I do not feel as though they have abandoned me. As I regain my understanding of my true self, I do not need the constant physical support they had been giving me. I know that the parts of myself who make me who I am are always within me, and that my true friends are

always there for me, regardless of whether or not they are actually present. What comes with the knowledge of this support is an immense sense of ease and bravery.

After exploring the entirety of the reversed choreography, I move my hands across my chest, displaying the vulnerable “soft front” Brown also highlights as a key to true belonging. I then exuberantly repeat the choreography in its normal order, happily expressing my true self. I am standing alone, I am one with myself, and I let my newfound wild heart beat proudly. It is vulnerable and uncharted territory, but I feel ready for whatever challenges lie ahead because of the confidence I have in myself. Brown explains what it is like to stand alone in relation to true belonging, saying:

“Once we’ve found the courage to stand alone, to say what we believe and do what we feel is right despite the criticism and fear, we may leave the wilderness, but the wild has marked our hearts. That doesn’t mean the wilderness is no longer difficult, it means that once we’ve braved it on our own, we will be painfully aware of our choices moving forward. We can spend our entire life betraying ourself and choosing fitting in over standing alone. But once we’ve stood up for ourself and our beliefs, the bar is higher. A wild heart fights fitting in and grieves betrayal.” (Brown, 148-149)

Now having a well-rounded sense of what it means to truly belong, I am ready to expel any self-doubt I have left. I prepare for one final battle against myself and those who would try to hurt my wild heart, which is what “Nadir” represents.

### **Nadir**

A nadir is “the lowest point in the fortunes of a person or organization” (New Oxford American Dictionary), so originally, I thought this dance would be like an onslaught of self-deprecation with a final moment of triumph over the internal and external forces that have barred me from my true self. However, as I continued choreographing the rest of the concert, I realized that it would work better dramatically if I made the choice to fight this battle. I had learned so much about what it means to truly belong, so it was time to take an active part in my own life.

To overcome the pain I have experienced once and for all, I must confront it head on; only then will I have truly moved forward. I would not have been ready or able to confront my pain without walking every step of the path I was on. I needed to struggle in order to learn who I am, as difficult as it was. I have learned what brings me joy and what gets in my way from achieving that joy. Now, I am ready to make the conscious decision to pursue my own happiness.

With caution, Amelia and Rachel, who have been watching me dance alone since the end of “Reclamation,” begin their attack after getting my approval. The duality of their characters is highlighted here, representing both external forces like enemies and bullies who attempt to tear down self-esteem, and internal forces like anxiety, depression, and jealousy that want total control over the function of the brain. They make multiple passes at me, each more challenging than the last, using different tactics like brute force, coercion, seduction, which finally leads to binding. My external selves use all of their strength to stop me from moving or breaking free, and attempt to remove every ounce of my strength. The choreography becomes harsh and grotesque, with an emphasis on partner work as Rachel and Amelia are constantly attached to my body. The choreography becomes less structured as the piece progresses to show the loss of strength against Amelia and Rachel’s attacks. The struggle ends with a collapse on the floor after crawling desperately trying to remove Rachel and Amelia who, like leeches, have grasped and dragged me down. Having now reached my personal nadir, my external selves detach, and for a moment, revert to their helpful, caring selves as they check on me to make sure that I am okay. I shun them, knowing that I must continue fighting to fully claim my true self. After this moment of softness, Rachel and Amelia move to the corner of the stage where Rachel left me in “Temptations” as a final test to coerce me to join them there. To join them, I would pit my mind against myself and forever lose touch with my true self. In my weakness, I am tempted, and



begin moving towards them. Here is where an important lesson about mindset from *Braving the Wilderness* comes into play:

“Stop walking through the world looking for confirmation that you don’t belong. You will always find it because you’ve made that your mission. Stop scouring people’s faces for evidence that you’re not enough. You will always find it because you’ve made that your goal. True belonging and self-worth are not goods; we don’t negotiate their value with the world. The truth about who we are lives in our hearts. Our call to courage is to protect our wild heart against constant evaluation, especially your own. No one belongs here more than you.” (Brown, 158)

If I join my external selves in darkness, I will be looking for confirmation that I do not belong. I will learn to fit in, not belong, and live with my true self locked inside. If I find the courage to go out on my own, I may feel more alone, but I will belong; to myself and to the world. I will have finally achieved the goal I have longed for since the beginning of my pilgrimage. As I take another step towards Rachel and Amelia, I find the courage to break away, and run to find my path to true belonging. As I try each aisle, my focus is pulled back to the center aisle that called me to begin my journey. I repeat the motif of running my hands across my chest to open my heart, and I run up the center aisle. I feel alone, vulnerable, and scared, but also free and content. The chaos moves to stillness, and I feel it: I have won the battle. I truly belong.

### **Apotheosis**

As I stand at the top of the center aisle, I take in the new world around me, exuding “a front made of love and a back built of courage” (Brown, 157). In one moment, I both belong to myself and to the world simultaneously, and it is immensely gratifying. It is a moment of self-actualization, which is the fifth and final need in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which he describes as “becom[ing] everything that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow, 1943). I take notice of my external selves, who are staring up at me, cautiously awaiting my next move. I slowly walk back down the aisle and pick up the shirt I took off at the end of “The Call,” which

has been lying on the floor since I gave it away. It now serves as a reminder of who I was before I started on my pilgrimage, and of the person I was then. I throw it up in the air, letting it land in the hands of Rachel and Amelia, as I run offstage to grab a gift for them: my socks. I return and present them each with one sock as a gift in kind for their support and teachings along the way. Then we each take a part of my shirt, and in celebration of our interconnectedness with one another, we run around with our pieces of clothing in somewhat of a ritual as the music builds, culminating with each of us putting on our new piece of armor. I had each of us wear something as a physical representation of “the mark of a wild heart,” which Brown describes as “living out the paradox of love in our lives. It’s the ability to be tough and tender, excited and scared, brave and afraid – all in the same moment. It’s showing up in our vulnerability and our courage, being both fierce and kind” (Brown, 155). It also represents how Rachel, Amelia, and I are all one in the same, with our new pieces of armor to continue braving the wilderness together. Together, we have reached our personal apotheosis, “the highest point in the development of something,” (Oxford New American Dictionary) which in our case, is the development of our true self.

“Apotheosis” is the longest piece of the concert, so this is one piece that I did a lot of preplanning for in preparation. The piece is split into multiple sections all connected by the overarching theme of celebrating the feeling of true belonging. The first section is another teaching section, similar to “Reclamation,” where I am now leading choreography while Amelia and Rachel are following, but here we move in a canon to signify the confidence I now have to forge my own path and to be a leader to those around me. It is fanciful and fun loving, as I want to spread the joy I feel fully and completely with the world and my friends. This leads into the short second section where I was inspired by the idea of a blooming flower, where we each in canon start on the ground and grow into our true selves. I had Amelia struggle to bloom in this

section as a way to show that I have learned how I can help others, so Rachel and I lift her up. We then move into the third section in unison, where we spell the word “BELONG” with our bodies, each spelling it facing a different direction which I used as a way to show how belonging can be interpreted differently by different people, yet it is still belonging. As we finish the third section, there is a moment of stillness where we are slowly pulled back toward one another, and move into the fourth section, which is a medley of the rest of the concert. I go in order from beginning to the end, repeating roughly two eight-counts of choreography from each piece, demonstrating the lessons I have learned along the way. Every step of my pilgrimage had a purpose. Every relationship forged or lost made me the person I am right now in this moment. To disregard any part of my journey would be a disservice to myself, as even the hardest of times can shape who we are as human beings. I carry my past with me not as baggage, but as tokens of who I was then that helped me become who I am now.

Having recounted my past in my pilgrimage to true belonging, I shift my focus to the present in the fifth section. In this section, unity and support are the impetus for my choreography. I use simpler movements to create strong images, like walking while all linked together, holding hands, and embracing one another. Rachel and Amelia lead me on a chase, almost like a game of tag, which harkens back to “Temptations,” but now seen in a positive light. After the chase, I create one of my favorite moments in the entire concert. Each using one of our forearms, we create a triangle together, and then, using our other hand, reach through the triangle and hold each other’s hands. It is a fairly simple image, but yet it signifies for me what it feels like to be one with yourself: to understand true belonging. We rise up together, still holding hands, and shift into an embrace. We then shift apart moving into the sixth section, which returns to the poking motif Amelia introduced in “Temptations.” We touch multiple parts of our

body starting with our foreheads and ending at our solar plexus, further demonstrating our synchronicity. Then reaching for one another, I return to the choreography I did when I first met Rachel and Amelia, starting this time with my duet with Amelia, which Rachel now joins, and we dance as a trio. I then repeat this with Rachel's duet, making it a trio with Amelia. Returning to this choreography was a way for me to say thank you to my external selves for guiding me along the way and for always being with me, and as a subtle way for me as the choreographer to thank my dancers for all of their work on the concert. I then move into the seventh and final section of "Apotheosis," a solo in which I celebrate who I am, loving the skin I am in, and the freedom true belonging has brought me. Rachel and Amelia move to the box, which they move center stage, posing in pictures representative of their characters. I take one last moment to move to the back wall, which I used choreographically as a place of great discovery in "Temptations" and hardship in "Nadir," and glide my hand along it, acknowledging how much I have learned from my pilgrimage. My external selves look back at me, and turn to face them, smiling. I walk downstage and join them on the box, ending with my motif from "Nascence" of true belonging.

### **Q&A and Conclusion**

Immediately after the performance, I had a brief question and answer session with the audience. Hearing from the audience gave me the chance to learn what people understood about the performance and true belonging, and what was less clear. I had prepared three questions to ask, which were as follows:

- 1) Looking at the choreography and story, what did you see that symbolized true belonging?
- 2) What moments in the project stood out the most, or were the most impactful?

### 3) What other questions or comments do you have?

Beginning with these three questions, I also wanted to create a dialogue about the performance, so I was prepared to ask further questions if I felt they were pertinent to the discussion.

The feedback and response I received was very helpful, and many people understood the concepts I wanted share. I was proud that I was able to explain these difficult concepts about belonging through dance, as they are already difficult to explain with words. One audience member explained where they saw true belonging in the movement: when Amelia, Rachel, and I would dance in unison. They further explained that overcoming the struggles, like being held down by my external selves in “Nadir,” which then shifted into unison dancing represented a gained sense of self or true belonging. I was also very pleased to know that the audience understood the dual-role concept for Rachel and Amelia. They saw that they both represented and extension of myself as well as other people, which was a huge relief to me as I was worried that it would not be clear as switching between those roles without the help of costumes could be confusing. It was really wonderful to be able to share this story exactly how I wanted to tell it, and that people connected with it. The feedback was all very positive, which made me very proud of my dancers and myself as our hard work paid off.

Through this project, I have gained a better understanding of true belonging. I became an active participant in my own belonging, and I shared my experiences with the world. I braved the wilderness through the distinction project process, and I hope I helped other people see the benefits of true belonging. When we belong to ourselves, we can more confidently belong to the world around us and create bonds of friendship and trust that can last a lifetime. Every person’s journey to true belonging is unique to them, as each person discovers what makes up their true selves. When we proudly share who we are with the world, then we can say we truly belong.

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Apartment 4E

The Class of 2020

“There will be times when standing alone feels too hard, too scary, and we’ll doubt our ability to make our way through the uncertainty. Someone, somewhere, will say, ‘Don’t do it. You don’t have what it takes to survive the wilderness.’ This is when you reach deep into your wild heart and remind yourself, ‘I am the wilderness.’” – Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*





## A Note from the Director

True belonging, as defined by Brené Brown in her book *Braving the Wilderness*, “is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn’t require you to **change** who you are, it requires you to **be** who you are.” It sounds like a daunting task. However, we must lean into this fear. As Maya Angelou reminds us, “The price is high. The reward is great.”

I am still on the journey to true belonging. There have been days when I know exactly who I am, and others when I have felt like anyone but myself. My desire to belong is strong – it’s a part of human nature – but I’ve learned how important it is not to compromise my own worth for anything. The journey is long and definitely not the easiest path to take. It is easier to follow the crowd; safer, too. The path to true belonging can be lonely at times. It is vulnerable, wild, and – honestly – a little scary. But I promise you, it is absolutely worth it.

## Cast

Lincoln Belford, Amelia Elias, Rachel Fish

Nasence

The Call

The Road of Trials

Temptations

Descent

Atonement

Reclamation

Nadir

Apotheosis

There will be a brief Q&A following the performance.