

The sound of gently falling rain and a single ray of sunshine wove through the dense green glowing bamboo forest to spotlight a girl sitting in an almost contortionist S-curve pose, her arms extended behind her and her hat angled to the ground. A wavering note from a Chinese flute, and the dance begins. I stare in awe at the dance my teacher has chosen, a solo dance performed by one of the best dancers in China. It seems impossibly hard to learn, only tangible on that little, flat, TV screen.

There was no available studio space for my class time so I practiced in my teacher's mirror-less basement. Consequently, I learned movements by focusing on how they felt, rather than how they looked. Feeling emotion in my movements and smiling with my eyes, true expression, would connect me to the audience and hopefully make them feel carefree, joyful, and enveloped within a rainy bamboo forest.

Waiting backstage the night of the Twin Cities Chinese New Year Gala, I was nervous and nauseous from my tight costume, hairstyle, and heavy makeup. As the sound of rain and the enchanting flute seeped throughout the auditorium, however, my anxiety subsided. I leaped across the stage, matching the accelerating tempo, sharing my joy with nearly 2000 people, but also absorbed in my movements, as if I were truly dancing alone in a darkened, mysterious bamboo forest. The music returned to the relaxed tempo it had begun with. The sound of the rain hushed and faded away. As I walked toward the audience, I heard sounds foreign to a secluded bamboo forest – cheers and applause.

When I first started dancing, I was one of the shyest and most awkward students, the kid who studied herself in the mirrors from the back of the class. Since then, through dancing in class, performances, outreaches, and competitions, I've come to believe in myself more, and have become more outgoing and resilient, which have helped me to

better transition to life in California. Dance is hard work and discipline and pain, but it's also expression of beauty and strength: every class I experience a little victory that makes me excited for the next lesson -- okay with looking silly or being imperfect.

My overall goals in the performing arts are to continue to learn and grow through dance and to contribute to my community. Every week I have specific goals such as improving on a new technique or skill, but I also have long term goals that I will strive for all of my life: to share my understanding of Chinese culture with others, to express myself through dance, to inspire others to dance, and to be mentally and physically strong.