

Creative Wellness: A Journey Through Trust, Art, and Healing

A few months ago, I received a message on Facebook from someone I hadn't seen in over a decade. Carmen had been just eight years old when we met during a production of *The Jungle Book* at the Hoogland Center in 2013. She had played the part of a radiant bird, fluttering through the stage with joy. I hadn't heard from her in years.

"Would you consider teaching a workshop at Washington University," she asked, "on trust in public health—but through a creative medium? Maybe music or dance?"

I found myself smiling at the screen. This wasn't just an opportunity—it felt like a reflection of something deeper, something I've carried with me all my life.

The Spark: A Dancer on the Screen

I was nine when I first saw her—an Indian classical dancer on television. Her eyes told stories without words; her movements seemed to breathe emotion. I remember sitting completely still, unable to look away.

My mother quietly joined me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. She pointed to the screen and whispered, "This is going to be your dance teacher."

A few days later, I stood at the doorway of her studio, my small hands clutching a colorful autograph book filled with signatures of people who inspired me. I didn't know it then, but this stunningly graceful lady who welcomed me that day would become far more than a teacher. She would be my anchor, my friend, and my philosopher and guide.

Art and Medicine: Parallel Paths

At seventeen, I left my home in New Delhi to begin medical school. My teachers in dance and music were heartbroken that I chose to pursue a career in medicine. They knew what I was leaving behind. And they were right—there wasn't much time for raagas or rehearsals amidst anatomy textbooks and tight exam schedules.

But I kept coming back to it. Late at night, when the silence was too loud, I would hum the notes of a familiar raga or move through a short dance sequence. Every time I did, something shifted inside me. It was like exhaling after holding my breath all day. I returned to my studying more focused, more whole.

In town, I was often the "unofficial" performer for medical conferences—sharing music and movement in spaces where stress and structure ruled. My connection to the arts wasn't just a hobby. It became a lifeline.

The art community embraced me—offering encouragement, comfort, and joy. They showed up when I was exhausted, they celebrated when I passed difficult exams, and they reminded me that my identity was more than my profession. That sense of belonging still stays with me. My artist friends continue to uplift me and inspire me.

Creative Wellness: The Healing Thread

So when Carmen reached out, I knew this wasn't just about trust in public health. It was about *creative trust*—in ourselves, in others, in the process of healing through art.

There is growing evidence that creativity isn't just good for the soul—it's essential for our well-being. The World Health Organization defines health as “a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being.” That means we can't separate healing from our emotional, expressive selves.

In Indian classical dance, we speak of the *Navarasa*—nine core emotional expressions that reflect the full human experience: love, courage, wonder, peace, laughter, sorrow, anger, fear, and disgust. In my workshop at Washington University, we used those expressions to explore body language and build conversations around trust—in each other, in healthcare, and in ourselves. It was one of the most fulfilling experiences I've had.

Why It Matters—for All of Us

Creativity isn't a luxury. It's not a side project. It's a **form of self-care**, as essential as sleep or exercise. Studies show that dancing reduces blood pressure and stress.

Ceramics and embroidery act like moving meditation. Making art increases dopamine levels, which improves focus, emotional regulation, and joy.

And no, you don't need to be a professional artist. Maybe you journaled once. Maybe you played the flute or painted watercolors. Start there. Reconnect with it—not as a project to finish, but as a part of yourself waiting to come alive again.

We are not meant to live split lives—one side professional, one side passionate.

Creative wellness invites us to integrate. To bring our whole selves into the room. To heal, not just treat. To live fully, not just function.

So take five minutes today. Hum. Sketch. Dance. Write one awkward line in a journal.

It's not about performance. It's about presence.

Let creativity lead you back to yourself.

As for me—I can't wait to return next year and share in that journey once again.

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