

An excerpt from *Saved by the Blues*

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I Learned How to Walk Again, so I Could Learn How to Dance Again

Jimmy Zamora, Sacramento, California, USA

“You need to interview Jimmy Zamora,” a fellow blues dancer told me after hearing that I was looking for stories about people who had used dance to recover from a physical limitation. “He has such an amazing story. I believe he’s actually writing a book about his recovery himself.” And so he is—but I’m grateful he was still open to contributing to this one. Jimmy wants to spread the word not just about how dancing can physically heal an individual but how it has the potential to heal the planet.

Jimmy got involved in social dancing after his life took a severe turn—but not the physical one that derailed his life. That came later. He first went through a divorce and a career change—after twelve years of marriage and eighteen years working for newspapers, he transitioned to being a single parent working in politics. He met a new woman whom he liked, who happened to be a dancer. She practiced West Coast swing dancing, but she knew Jimmy was more of a blues music kind of guy. She encouraged him to try blues dancing, and he did. He

attended a blues fusion dance event in March 2011 and thoroughly loved it.

“One of the things that struck me about it is that I’m a talker and a writer—words just pour out of me; you squeeze me, and they come out—and dance is a social encounter that I couldn’t talk my way through. Dance is a different language. That was a complete challenge for me, but a beautiful one. I’m learning this whole new way to communicate, and it came at a point in life when I needed an emotional reset button.”

Jimmy’s physical reset button came next. Only a month after attending his first blues dance event, he woke up one morning feeling completely numb on the left side of his body. By the end of the day, it had started to spread, so he checked into the emergency room. He thought he might be having a stroke; the doctor assured him it was not a stroke, although he didn’t know what it was. Jimmy was told to go home that night, and if it was still bothering him when he woke up, to come back to the hospital the next day. It would more than bother him. The next morning, he woke up and couldn’t walk. The condition had spread to both his legs.

“It wasn’t that I was paralyzed. I could still wiggle my toes and lift my legs, but I’d lost effective control of my muscles. Something zapped through me. I woke up in the morning, my dog wanted to go to the bathroom, I needed to feed my daughter breakfast, and I can’t walk. So I’m dragging myself and pushing on walls trying to balance myself. Finally, I was able to get someone to pick

up my daughter, and I got a ride to the hospital. I didn't come back home after that for a month."

It turned out to be a condition called transverse myelitis—a neurological condition related to inflammation of the spinal cord, whose symptoms overlap a lot with multiple sclerosis symptoms. Some patients are symptom-free six months later; others show signs of improvement up to two years later, and others may never show signs of recovery. "I was terrified that first morning. I didn't know how serious it was."

Jimmy immediately entered spinal rehab and remained there for three weeks. "They essentially taught me how to walk again." A characteristic of Jimmy's ailment is that his muscles still function properly, but he can lose all muscle memory. "We all learn to walk as toddlers but to have to learn how to do it again forty years later is crazy—it's really easy to overthink. With this condition, my feet were almost numb, so it was hard to feel the floor. It's scary. You've got to learn to trust."

They sent him home with a wheelchair, but he was determined to learn how to walk again, so he could learn how to dance again. "Even when I was in a wheelchair in rehab, I would lean back and put my feet in the air and move them to the beat of music." He used a walker before transitioning to crutches and then later a cane.

"I went to a lot of physical therapy, and dance classes are the best physical therapy—blues is one of the best forms of physical therapy." Even though it was not long before he stopped using his walker to walk, he used it to teach himself how to dance. He set up two walkers

and stood in the middle of them, rocking back and forth between them. He still had poor balance, but he felt safe that he'd have something to grab on to. "It was like a game; I'd spread the circle a little further apart and just rock my feet back and forth and begin to incorporate slides."

Eventually, he worked up enough coordination and courage to attend a blues dance. He wasn't sure he'd be able to dance with a partner yet, but at one point a man who was bigger than him offered. "Try it. Dance with me." As those who are new to blues dancing are likely beginning to learn through these stories, it is not uncommon for a male to dance with a male or a female to dance with another female. What is uncommon is to have to do so out of necessity.

"He could hold me up, so I danced with him like four times that night. I wanted to cry. I was like, 'God, I can actually dance again!' I mean, I was terrible at it, but it became a passion of mine." By late 2012, Jimmy started feeling really comfortable with partner dancing again. "It took a year or so of practice before then, where I wasn't really progressing, but I was doing it because I loved it and I had to do it. I felt it deep inside—I couldn't live with myself if I didn't dance."

Blues dancing was the perfect introduction back into the dance world for Jimmy.

"I always liked the music and the connection, and I realized that I could do it because you can dance small with blues. I could dance small and still give someone a good experience. Having a medical challenge to

overcome forced me to become a different kind of dancer than I would have been otherwise. I've learned to be a better listener through dancing. I earned a living by being a talker, but everyone communicates differently in dance. With some people, you have to learn how to hear them. Since I was the guy who had the fewest moves, by keeping it open, I was saying to the other person, 'What do you want to do? This is your opportunity to embellish, to design, to communicate with me.'"

As Jimmy said, there's no such thing as a bad dance anyway. "A dance is still a dance even if it's not the best dance. Even if it's some beginner who steps on your toes, whose arms turn into spaghetti, she still gave you a dance. The music played, and you were on the dance floor with a wonderful human being. The other night, someone stepped on my toes—someone else's follow, and wearing a heel. She apologized to me later in the night, and I said, 'My feet are already numb, so if you're going to step on someone's feet, it may as well be mine.'"

Gradually, however, Jimmy has been able to gain some sensitivity back in his feet by incorporating physical therapy into every moment of his life. "I used to walk my dog barefoot around the block because it increased the sensitivity in my feet; it helped wake up nerve endings. When I brush my teeth, I practice standing on one leg, or I cook while on one leg. I have a workstation at my job where the desk can be raised, so I can stand, and I'll work while standing on one foot."

While he was in recovery, Jimmy didn't go back to work for several months. "I burned up all my sick time

and most of my vacation time. I came really close to filing for permanent disability. I definitely qualified.” He did go back to working on political campaigns eventually, however, and he noticed a correlation between yeses in dance and those given through voting. “One of the things I realized is nobody ever wins an election by converting ‘no’ votes to yeses; you win by finding more votes that are ‘yes’ from the start.” Therefore, he doesn’t get hung up on the people who don’t enjoy his dance style—he instead focuses on the yeses. “I work to my fans.” He laughed.

No matter what, he’s always felt welcomed by the blues fusion community. “Most of the people in my life before dance were writers. They understood my humor, the speed at which my brain was moving, et cetera. But the people I’ve met through dance...the way they’ve embraced me—it’s such a beautiful thing. After all those years of being a journalist and PR person, being really well-known in media—these dancers didn’t know me at all. I didn’t exist on any of those planes for them. I’m just a dude who’s asking them to dance.”

Even though Jimmy has “a ton of friends,” his physical condition can still leave him feeling lonely. “When you first wake up in the morning, and your balance is off, and you need the support of the wall, it’s a lonely and scary thing. So the fact that people still want to dance with me—that’s the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It’s a powerful form of emotional validation that this journey was worth it.”

Physical contact played a big role in Jimmy's health—even outside of the role it played in his physical recovery. “The intimacy of blues is backed up by the culture. Connection with others has been fundamentally healing to me, because a blues dance is kind of a hug. Hugs heal. Even before I got sick, it was good for me. Coming out of a divorce, there were levels of intimacy I was having trouble with. But from the blues dance culture, I've learned that you can have a pretty intense romance within a three-minute song. That was fulfilling something for me before I got sick, and then after I got sick, I appreciated it in a totally profound new way. I recognized it was really nourishing for me—I'd come back home after a dance, and I'd just feel this *high*.”

That emotional high carried over in his workday as well. “I'm so much better, so much happier at work, the day after a night out dancing. I've never had a bad night of dancing. I work in a profession that is extremely energy draining. I'll leave work wearing a suit and tie, coming from a crazy political thing, and one little voice in me is saying, ‘You're totally wiped—just go home and relax,’ and the other voice says, ‘You've never regretted dancing. Ever. Just go and do it for an hour.’ But 99.9 percent of the time, I end up staying until it ends.

“A dance is more than a dance. It's an emotional thing; I'm in a space where it's safe for me to be vulnerable. In the political arena, you can't actually be vulnerable unless it's in a way that makes you appear stronger. But with blues, I can just be me—it's okay. I can be vulnerable there. As soon as I walk into a dance, my

stress level goes down. I go in there and slide my tie off, and I'm home."

I asked Jimmy if he believes dancing could change the world, and he related how it could begin to do so by altering the personalities of some of the worst people he crossed paths with in the political world.

"I know a lot of jerks in the world, but I don't know many on the dance floor at all. I think if more people danced, it would decrease the percentage of people that are jerks. Dance teaches good lessons as far as socialization. All women have stories about men who said or did something that made them feel very uncomfortable. That can happen sometimes on the dance floor, but it happens a lot less, because it's a culture of consent. You have to ask, and you have to be nice, or no one's going to want to dance with you. The market speaks."

As far as I could tell, Jimmy had no problem finding his own following—and he is more than ready to wave the blues banner.

"I'd like to have my last dance be on my last day of life, when I'm over one hundred. As long as someone's willing to dance with me, I'll dance. And that person who's willing to dance with me can be me."



Photo by Shane Meyers/Speakeasy Photos

