

# Impossible Dreams I Didn't Know Enough to Dream About

Shaun Parry  
Honored Alumni Lecture October 2015

**Ed Adams:** Welcome. I'm Ed Adams, Dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communications. We're glad to have you in attendance with us today. Today we honor one of our alumni, Shaun Parry, who was among the first class to graduate with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in music dance theatre, and has spent twenty years as a professional. We are excited to hear from him today, and about his career journey. His speech is entitled "Impossible Dreams I Didn't Know Enough to Dream About." We welcome his family members and friends who are in attendance.

Our invocation will be given by Kyla Threlfall, a senior majoring in dance education. Following Kyla's prayer, Marilyn Berrett, professor of dance and chair of the Dance Department will provide the introduction. Following Mr. Parry's comments, Rachel Kimball, who is also a senior majoring in dance education, will give the benediction.

**Marilyn Berrett:** Welcome. We are thrilled that you're all here, and I think you're in for a thrill. I'm privileged and honored to introduce Shaun to you today.

Shaun Parry is a veteran performing artist from New York City. He *was* an x-ray and lab technician before going into the arts. Mr. Parry graduated from Brigham Young University with a degree in music dance theatre, and as Dean Adams said, was a part of the founding group of this unique cross-disciplinary major at BYU, in 1995. He served a mission in Kobe, Japan, and that is where his passion for travel throughout the world, culture, and languages began. Since then, he's taught, performed, choreographed, or directed in Japan, Greece, Costa Rica, the Caribbean, Italy, Canada, Switzerland, England, France, Peru, India, Kenya, China, and New York and Hawaii—and most of the states in between.

He's spent the past sixteen years—or twenty years, really—based in New York City, where his career has spanned Broadway, Off-Broadway, national and international Broadway tours, the Metropolitan Opera, National Ballroom Championships, MTV, and more. A few highlights from his credits include—I'm going to go fast, because you'll know these—*Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, *Aida* (the Broadway international tour in the original Japanese cast recording), *A Christmas Carol*, *A Few Good Men*, *All Shook Up*, *West Side Story*, *Joseph and the Technicolor Dream Coat*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Damn Yankees*, *Swing!*, and *Fosse*. He's also performed with the New York Theater Ballet, Martha Graham Dance Company, Buglisi/Foreman Dance, and has, again, been a ten-time dance champion in National Championships in Ballroom Dance.

Most recently, he was the dance captain for *Table of Silence*, a tribute in the Lincoln Center Plaza to those who lost their lives on 9/11. Mr. Parry was chosen as one of the Top Ten Danz-de-Jour Master Teachers at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. He has directed and choreographed for many people that you know; the one I'll mention is David Archuleta—because he's here with us on campus this week—during his American Idol finals. Mr. Parry was a speaker at the first World Parliament on Spirituality, held in Hyderabad, India, in December 2012. His original song, "Now or Never, A Love Song to Humanity," had its public debut during the closing Cultural Concert at that event.

In addition to his incredible career in the performing arts, Mr. Parry is the founder and president of Promethean Spark International, a non-profit organization that teaches essential life skills to impoverished youth worldwide through training in the performing arts. He's the founder and artistic director of Life Dance Troupe, the first ever dance company created out of youth from leprosy colonies.

I'm going to go a little bit faster, because I want him to spend his time with you. Let me just add, on a personal note, that as we sat together with the other honorees of the eleven colleges across campus

this morning, there was an amazing and inspiring through-line that what people do when they graduate from BYU is go out and make a real difference in the world. Shaun is certainly at the top of the list of that. Please welcome alumnus, and good friend, Shaun Parry.

**Shaun Parry:** Thank you so much for being here; I appreciate you coming. This is absolutely amazing. I expected a nice little group right in front, but here we are, almost full, in the Madsen Recital Hall. Thank you. Honestly, this is one of the most surreal experiences I've had—of all of the things that Marilyn mentioned, and the things in my life path, standing here and speaking to you is kind of weird. It's surreal because I'm still that podunk kid that grew up in Mesa, Arizona. That's just me.

I don't have any amazing, earth-shattering things to tell you today—but maybe they will be for somebody in here, I don't know. Some of the things that have come to me—I'm just going to mention one thing that's kind of earth-shattering and exciting for me, and then we'll come back to it right at the end. I've traveled across the world and met with every level of life, and felt the heartbeat of humanity, and it's been amazing for me to see. There are nay-sayers out there who say things are getting worse and worse, and we're doomed, but if you look at the lifespan of humanity—from the stone ages throughout time until we hit the industrial age and the technological age and then the space age, and now we're into the information age—we're right on the precipice, ready to go into a new age.

That new age is the age of enlightenment. It's amazing what's happening out in the world, and the good that's happening from people, just like you, who are going out and making such a huge difference in the world, and lifting humanity in so many ways. To me, that's earth-shattering and exciting, because it's absolutely true that an age of enlightenment is coming.

Standing here is especially interesting, because there are members of this audience who stood here twenty years ago and shared their life stories with me, and that changed my life. They shared their knowledge and wisdom, and set a foundation and a trajectory for me that I didn't know was possible. I thank you. And to family who are here, who have been there for me, and with me, through all the ups and downs: thank you so much.

So, like I said, this is surreal, because inside I'm just that podunk kid. I'm going to take you on a little journey here in the next half hour or so; I'm going to hit some stepping stones, so you can see a little bit of the journey that I took which ended up with impossible dreams that I had no way I could have dreamed about back then.

I think I masked it okay, but I was really awkward. I was odd. I did not fit in. I had no idea, but I was a go-getter. I threw myself 100 percent into everything I did. Let me give you a little example of me growing up: at a junior high dance, I asked a girl to dance—this is just one little example to give you an idea. We went out on the dance floor, and I was very nervous to dance with her. I remember this very well because it was the first time I was dancing. I was looking around, thinking *I hope nobody's looking at me. Should I talk to her? No, no, it's cool; we'll just be cool. It's all good.*

Then I thought. *I want to do something different. I'm tired of doing this: [shuffling dance step]. I've done it my whole life! Well, it was junior high. This is all we do at the dances! I'm going to bust out a little; I'm going to do something different: [does a wider shuffling dance step]. Whoa, I hope nobody saw that. I did it!*

That happened.

My hair is curly—if it's not this long, then it fros. I wake up in the morning, and it falls side to side. I didn't know what to do with it; I didn't know how to use product. I would part it on the side, and I'd comb it hard to the side, and I'd try that. Then I would part it in the middle and do a little *Leave it to Beaver*. I tried to tame it. I tried so hard. I tried so hard to fit it and to do everything right.

Not fitting in was interesting, because I had a drive, a passion, and I didn't understand it. Then I also had, on the other side, an uncanny existential awareness that I couldn't really talk about to a lot of people. I

thought a lot about eternity, about humanity as a whole, and about my legacy. I mean, at ten-years-old I was thinking about these things and thinking *What am I going to leave?*

I would also think about things very symbolically. My family will get a kick out of this one: movies were not just movies. They were deeper: *There's more to this than a fun little movie*. There's something. Did you guys know that the Disney animation of *Cinderella* tells the whole Plan of Salvation? I would love to get a nice Facebook response from some of you in a week or so after you've gone back and looked at it and analyzed it in depth—and written scripture references for every scene in Disney's *Cinderella*.

I think you can get the idea, right? My family, my mom and dad, taught me wonderful, beautiful things and raised me well. They taught me the gospel and gave me an amazing foundation.

One of the things that they would say was, “Okay, when we go to a public place”—there were ten kids in my family, so we'd kind of make a mess—“we need to leave this place better than we found it.”

We would go and clean it all up, and in my ten-year-old mind, I was thinking, *Hmm, I wonder if I can apply that to my life? I come to Earth, maybe—can I leave Earth better than I found it? When I leave, what will the difference be? Will it matter that I was here?*

These ideas were in my mind, and I was out there. I set a mantra for myself; I don't even remember when I set it, but it was “Life is an adventure.” At that time, I didn't know what *hashtag* was, but if I did, that would have been it. I still live by that mantra. I've lived by it the whole time since I was young. As you can see, I'm not one to sit around and pick my nose—not much. So “Life is an adventure,” but I'm still that kid with the curly hair I didn't know what to do with.

Let's go a little deeper on that: I actually think the evolution of being comfortable in my skin and dancing and all that that came about around the time that I was able to keep my hair somewhat tame, but still let it have a personality of its own. Let it “Fly, Be Free!” and be what it wanted to be. I think that honestly has a deeper meaning. Seriously, I think there's more. You might want to look at the way you do your hair. Are you forcing it into something that isn't what it wants to do? How comfortable are you in your skin? Go take a dance class and get a little bit more comfortable in who you are. That transition—I haven't really studied it out, but it's a powerful insight that I think I'll write a book on one day.

So what happened? I'm going to jump through some of these things. Like I said, I'm going to hit some stepping stones.

I went through high school, I was go-get-'em. I played the french horn; I was on top of academics. I'm just going to read this, because I don't have any idea—I was on the wrestling team; I was the debate team captain; I was seminary president; I was in the show choirs in high school. Then I did the regional choirs and all-state choirs, and had to get out of wrestling meets to go to the choir. Then I was highly active in Boy Scouts, and did my AP classes.

We also had a thing called A-hour; I don't know if you guys know what that is? In high school it was before school, an hour that you could take classes, and they were offered for seniors that needed to get an extra class in or they couldn't graduate.

I went to my counselor as a sophomore and said, “Can I take a class A-hour?”

She said, “Why?”

“Well, this is free education and all, and I want to learn as much as I can before I graduate. So could I?”

“I don't see why not.”

So I signed up for chemistry A-hour. I took it with all of the guys who were graduating who had flunked chemistry earlier on. I helped them with their chemistry.

I also took a class during my lunch hour because we had a full hour for lunch, and I thought, *Why waste that time?* “Can I take a class during lunch?”

My counselor asked, “When will you eat?”

“Oh, I can take a sack lunch and eat it between classes.”

“Okay.”

So I did that all through high school. It was really interesting. I honestly didn't understand those guys who were trying to ditch classes, whose goal was to lounge around and do nothing as much as possible. I couldn't relate to it. It's interesting to me.

Okay, I'm going to jump. After high school, I was still this guy—I'd never been in a dance studio, I'd never done anything really in the arts so much.

I don't admit this to my friends on Broadway and the community there, but I didn't know Broadway existed all the time growing up. Honestly, I thought it was a thing of the past. I thought it was like Vaudeville: it had its heyday and was done. Now we'd moved on to rap and R&B. It's all over. I was so sad.

My family's kind of vintage; we didn't have the new stuff, so we would actually listen to the LPs. Do you know what those are? It rode the roundtable and we put the needle on and then we'd listen to it. That's what I did growing up. I listened to *Oklahoma* and *Camelot* and *Sound of Music*. I'd sing along and sigh, *I was born in the wrong era. Oh my gosh, it's so cool that they used to write those things. Now it's all over. Oh well, I guess I'll be a doctor.*

Seriously, I was all set to become a doctor. I loved chemistry and math and science. My calculus class was awesome, one of my favorite classes. It was so cool; seriously, I loved it. I was fine with it; it was great.

But it just so happened that I was picking up a cousin of mine from her ballet class. I went to Jeanne Wright's dance studio in Mesa, Arizona. I'm sitting there in the lobby, and I'm listening to the music that they're playing over the speaker. I'd never heard it before.

I thought, *What is that? It's synthesized, but it's orchestrated, but it's ominous and beautiful. Something I've never heard before: [Overture of Phantom of the Opera plays]. What in the world? This is so cool! How? Who wrote this? I've never heard anything so amazing.* I had chills up and down my spine.

I went and asked, "Excuse me. What is this playing? What is this music?"

They looked at me weird and said, "Uh, hello, it's *Phantom of the Opera*?"

"No, I've seen the old movie. They did not play this during the movie."

"You know, Andrew Lloyd Webber?"

"Who's that? When was this written? When did he write this?"

"Just a few years ago. It's on Broadway now."

I said, "I'm sorry, excuse me? On Broadway, what?"

"Yeah, it's on Broadway right now."

"There's a Broadway now?! It's playing now?! There are people doing Broadway now?!"

The angels sang and the clouds parted.

It didn't really change my life that much at that time, but in years to come, it was drastic. That was the spawning seed, at the moment they said, "Broadway still exists." So I moved on from that.

Just because you know something doesn't mean you know it. We need to be open and ready to learn constantly throughout our lives, because your paradigm will shift, even when you are in your middle age. You'll learn things and your whole life will change. Be ready for that. Be open for that. Because that will send you in the right direction.

From there, we jump into college. I came to BYU. Of course, I was pre-med/zoology. That was what I had planned; I'd dreamed about it all the time growing up. *I'm going to become a doctor, of course; that's what it is. My mom had ten kids; people need doctors. Being a doctor is not going to go out of fashion. We will always need doctors so long as there are humans on the earth. So that's what I'm going to do.* I wanted to help people. I wanted to make a difference, right? Hence pre-med/zoology.

A very wise Zoology 339 professor—I don't remember his name, but he was very wise because he pulled me to the side and said, "Shaun, just getting to know your personality, I'm assuming you want to work with people."

“I’m going to be a doctor. Yeah, people.”

He said, “You might want to change your major, because zoology is going to tell them you’ll research the rest of your life.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Do something with more human interaction. Do pre-med/something-else.”

“Okay, thank you.”

I looked around and thought, *There’s this new major they just started called Music Dance Theatre. I was in show choir! How fun! I could be the singing and dancing doctor! That would be awesome!*

So I auditioned—Randy, I’m sorry, I have not had a chance to apologize for that audition. I was turned down. Seriously.

They said, “No, you can’t be in the major.” They explained to me, “You have raw talent, but you’re not developed enough so that you would reach the level of proficiency we need you to by graduation. So no thanks. But we’ll let you take a couple of the major classes if you’d like.”

“Okay, cool. I’ll do that.” *Go-get-’em. Opportunity!* So I did that.

Just before that semester ended, Chuck Whitman—he’s not here anymore, he’s retired. He was my theatre professor. He pulled me aside and said, “Shaun, a few of the faculty who have taught you over this last semester, we got together and were talking, and we agree that in all of our time teaching, we’ve never seen anyone progress as fast as you have this last semester. If you would like to re-audition, we would accept you into the major, if you’d like to do that.”

“Okay! Cool!” So I did.

I did not know the first thing about monologues or singing solos or dancing. I had no clue. Again, show choir was my experience. That was it. They took a big chance on me coming in. Again, I wanted to say thank you.

It was a struggle. It was such a struggle. Since I was pre-med, I was a quadruple major: I was pre-med/music/dance/theatre. I had seventeen to twenty-one credits every semester. I was killing myself, with only four hours of sleep. But it was okay—well, it wasn’t okay, I was killing myself. I had to pick one or the other.

Of course, it was going to be medicine. I’d wanted it my whole life! Of course, that’s what I needed to do. I seek spiritual guidance when I try to make decisions, so I prayed about it.

I said, “Of course I need to go into the medical profession, so I need to drop all the arts and really focus on what I’m going to do.”

I felt nothing. Zero.

*Okay, I need to show faith. I need to move forward; I’m going to do this. Then it’ll all work. I need to step into the dark.*

I changed everything, and I moved forward with these other classes. But I still felt anxiety, and dark and confusion, and I thought, *No—stupor of thought?* So then I started wrestling with it. It took me two weeks to wrestle it.

Finally I said, “Okay, if this is what I’m supposed to do—I think it’s stupid, I think it’s ridiculous. Who lives their life going from audition to audition, not knowing when they’re going to have the next job? Literally you’re unemployed all the time, every time you turn around. Who does that? What kind of a person in their right mind? Okay, whatever, all right.”

I went and switched things around again, and I prayed. This time there was an undeniable, “Yes. You have to go in this direction.”

*Okay.* I did not think it was the right thing. My finite mind, said, “That’s ridiculous.” But somebody else knew better.

I’ve learned over the years that if you seek spiritual guidance, not only daily, but especially in the crossroads, honestly, you will be guided to that place where you can do the greatest good. Even though you don’t know that yet.

So I did. 110 percent, pushed it, made it happen.

One of the most difficult parts of that is the follow-through. Even though you don’t know why, you’ve got to have the courage to stick to it and keep going, even though you think, *Eh, I don’t think this is*

*right*. Keep going, keep following that, because there's something down the road you don't know is coming. There are impossible dreams that you don't know enough to dream about yet.

So I did it. I dove in. Again, I'm a 110 percent person. I gave it everything.

Here's a quick little incident to share some of the challenges that we faced—I say *we* because my teachers were right there with me. They struggled with me. There was more than once when my teachers dropped their face into their hands and said, “Oh dear, what are we going to do with you, Shaun?” It was that I was trying to make up a decade of basic training in a couple of years.

So here's a quick little incident, which has become legend here at BYU from what I hear. I wish Dave Tinney were here. Dave Tinney, are you out there? No? I wish he were here, because I think he's the one who actually started telling this story to everyone. He's the only other one who knows it. I'm here to clarify any details that may have gone astray over the last twenty years. And to admit it was me.

I signed up for my first ballet class. I was reading the description, and it said, “We expect you to wear tights.” *I don't have any tights.*

I asked around, and they said, “Oh, they have them over at the RB. They have tights for you that you can get just by showing your card. It's like shorts and t-shirts; they have the tights over there.”

“Oh great. Okay, they'll take care of it.”

I went over there and showed them my card. They gave me a black pair of tights and a dance belt. I took it over and I put the tights on, and they were really baggy—they'd been stretched out, they were old, and I thought, *I can't dance in this! They're going to fall down! Oh! No wonder it's called a dance belt!*

I put the dance belt on and tucked it in a little bit. *How smart! It held up the tights. Perfect.* I was thrilled. I thought, *Oh, they've thought of everything.*

I marched down to the RB, heading down the hall. People were looking at me, giggling and laughing, and I thought, *Of course, I'm in tights, they're going to laugh. Guys don't wear tights. But I do.*

I got into my class. Sandra Allen was teaching. I got to the bar. I was the only guy in the class; all the girls were in pink tights. I was feeling a little bit self-conscious in my tights. Nobody talked to me. I went to my place at the bar and thought, *I'm ready.*

Sandra came in, and she was a little bit flustered. “Okay, let's start... umm...”

About ten minutes into the class, Dave Tinney came walking in, and Sandra quickly whispered to him. He walked over to me and said, “Shaun, could you step outside with me, just for a second?”

I said, “Sure.” *I'm not in trouble. I'm a good student, I'm sure I'm not in trouble. But maybe they want me to move up a level! Maybe they think I should be in Intermediate instead of Beginning. We'll see.*

We went out there and Dave explained, “Umm, a dance belt is kind of like a dancer's underwear. It's support for the male dancer, so it's worn under the tights. You might want to fix that.”

“Oh, okay then... thank you.”

I did the walk of shame down the RB hallway. I changed it and did a little knot to hold the tights up, because they were going to fall off anyway.

And I went back to class.

That's the key. You have to be able to look like a fool sometimes if you want to become a master. It's true about any discipline. The key is to go back to class after you were a fool, and be okay with that. Face the humiliation, walk back into class, smile at everyone, go to your place at the bar, and continue on as if nothing happened.

This is what the teachers got to deal with.

We're going to jump a little bit. Guess what? I graduated. I worked so hard, and I spent so much time in studios, and my teachers worked so hard. I graduated with 228 credits. I could have graduated twice, almost. I took a lot of extra classes. I just wanted to learn and grow, so I took a whole bunch of extra classes. But I still felt under-par. I still felt like I wasn't ready to be a professional.

I thought, *Oh, what am I going to do?*

I'd taken a whole bunch of religion classes—a ton of them—and I checked with the CES Department. I'd taken enough classes, and the right classes, to become a seminary teacher. I was a full-time seminary teacher for CES for a year. I was assigned down to St. George.

There was a transition: I thought, *Oh, I was going to be an artist, but now it looks like I'm going to teach seminary. Another big sacrifice, another twist in the road, but now I understand. I get it. That's why I was supposed to go into the arts: so I could be a better seminary teacher and so I could help all these kids. Okay, I get it. Yes. Now I know.*

At the end of that first year teaching full-time, they came to me and said, “Shaun, you're not on the roster for next year. We're not sure why, but you're not going to go on next year to teach seminary. Good luck. Go do something—whatever you're going to do with your life.”

*No! I just sacrificed everything! Umm, okay.*

Interesting thing: you will be guided, and it will be 100 percent, “This is what you're supposed to do.” Boom! But then you will be guided somewhere else, either along the way or after you get there, because that was preparation. You didn't know it, you thought it was the end, but that was preparation. Those twists and turns you take, they're all preparation for a future mission that you don't know anything about, but it is in your path if you will follow the guidelines, and go through those twists and turns. They will require things of you that you don't have yet, but you're being prepared for them.

I ended up out in New York after that. I did a cruise ship—seminary teaching to cruise ship, almost the same thing. I made connections on that cruise ship to be able to move to New York.

In New York, same thing, I was 100 percent. I was running—literally, with a backpack on, running—over a hundred blocks a day, hitting two to three auditions every single day.

I started booking work. I started getting paying gigs. I was able to start making a living at this.

So if you really want something, you will sacrifice what it takes to get it. If you really don't want it that bad, you'll find something else that you do want that bad, and you'll sacrifice what you have to in order to get that. Find your priorities, be willing to sacrifice for them, and it will come to fruition.

Now, one of the first things that happened—I wish I had time to tell you the story—I ended up getting a contract with the New York Theatre Ballet. A New York Ballet Company! What?! Yeah. So I danced with New York Theatre Ballet. This was one of those impossible dreams.

I went ahead and was able to do New York Theatre Ballet, and I did that for the first year. Soon after that, I went into the wrong audition. Accidentally. I went three hours early; I was going to sign up so I could be first on the list. But there was a whole line there already, and I thought, *Sigh, three hours before? Okay.*

I got up to the front of the line and I went to sign up, and they said, “I'm sorry, we don't know you. What is your name?”

I thought, *They don't ask that. What?* “My name's Shaun Parry.”

“What are you here for?”

“I'm auditioning for the new musical called *Aaron*; it's part river dance, part jazz.” It was never made. “He's going to New Zealand, right? This is it, right? This is the one?”

“No, this is the audition for the Martha Graham Dance Company.”

“Oh, well, sorry.”

“Wait, wait. Have you ever done any Graham?”

“Oh, a little bit.” I did one semester at BYU.

“Would you like to audition? You might as well.”

“Okay, sure.” *What's the worst that could happen? They'll say no.*

After three call backs—obviously I made a fool of myself—but they saw potential in me, and technique enough that they offered me a contract on Graham 2. So I danced with the Graham Company. I'm still connected to those people, and work with them off and on to this day.

Do not limit yourself! Don't say no to yourself!

Let them say no. They will, plenty of times. But sometimes, they won't, and a whole new door will open to you, and a whole new universe of amazing things.

All right, so the time came, and I did my Broadway debut. It just so happened that it was ten years after I first found out that Broadway still existed, and it just so happened that it was in the Imperial Theater. I was bowing to two-thousand people and a standing ovation, in none other than *Phantom of the Opera*.

Full circle! Yeah, it was amazing.

I'm going to jump through some of these, and cap some things off here that I want you to know.

Between gigs, I would go teach at different studios, nationally and internationally; I would get called to teach at different things. Vania Masías, in Peru, was the Prima Ballerina for the Municipal Ballet de Lima. This is a picture of us performing down in Peru. While I was there, she took me out to the slums, and showed me the real Peru. We ran into these guys who were dancing on the streets.

I offered to teach them. I said, "Look, I'll stay for an extra couple weeks"—I was supposed to be there for two weeks—"I'll stay for another couple weeks, and work with them. I want to help them."

We arranged for them to come in, and I worked with them. We came in that first day—I walked in, and figured, "All right, you guys, just line up and copy me. Just mirror me. I'll put the music on, this will be easy."

Couldn't do it. They went off to their corners, hoods over their heads; they were talking their street Spanish that I didn't understand. For four hours I was trying to pull them and help them and trying to do it.

I thought, *Maybe tomorrow will be better.*

I came back the next day. Same thing. You can lead the horse to water, but can't force it to drink. I thought, *I'm done.* But again, I needed to seek that spiritual guidance.

That night, I was praying, and I said, "You know that I'm not a quitter. You know that. But maybe I should just cut my losses, and go somewhere where I can actually accomplish something fruitful. Should I go back to New York? I'm done here. Right? This is good."

I meditated and waited, and the only thing that came to me was, "The same things that are keeping them from doing your class will keep them from getting an education, will keep them from having jobs and holding them down, and will keep them from having a good family life or succeeding at any endeavor they might do the rest of their life."

That was it. It wasn't "Build an ark." It wasn't "Do something." It was just this idea.

I wrestled with it all night—putting all this symbology that I lived with together with literalism. I was trying to put it together.

I said, "Okay, maybe I'm here to not teach dance, but these basic life skills—I mean, things you basically need, that we take for granted—things like respect, focus—being able to concentrate for more than thirty seconds at a time, being able to work together as a team, setting goals and working towards those goals, and just the basics."

I came in the next day with a very different outlook, and a different approach.

I walked in, and I stood there and said, "Okay, I've got this thing I'm going to teach you guys, but I want you—actually you know what? It's so easy, my grandma can do this stuff. But you don't have what it takes; you can't do it. So I'm not going to teach you."

And I walked out.

They said, "What? Whoa, whoa, whoa. No, you said it's easy. Why can't we do it? We can do it. I'm sure we can do it."

I said, "No you can't. It's *impossible* for you. Therefore, I will not teach you."

"Well, maybe we can. I don't know, maybe, give us a try."

"Okay, here's the deal: if I teach this to you, everyone of you has to do it. If one person gives up, you *all* gave up and I'll quit. We're out, we're done. Okay? Every single person has to do it, nobody gives up. If one person makes a mistake, we all made a mistake and we start over. You guys okay with that? Those are the rules."

“Okay, cool. Yeah, we can do that.”

We all stood in lines. I stood up there, feet together, and put a finger in the air. If we had time, I’d have you all do it. Put your finger in the air—we’ve got a few participants here.

“All right, I want you to move just your finger for thirty seconds. *Only* your finger. Nothing else. Mark, set,” and we started.

Within two seconds, somebody turned and looked to the side.

I said, “No, stop. You just moved your head. I said only your finger.”

“Oh, okay.”

We struggled. We *struggled*. They kept at it. There were a couple of them who kept messing up, around fifteen seconds: they kept laughing or stopping.

They started placing themselves saying, “Dude, we’re all trying hard, and you’re messing us up, man. Come on, do it right.”

“All right, all right. I’ll do it.”

One of them had to close his eyes because he couldn’t concentrate.

We finally got to it—28, 29, 30! Yes! High fives!

They said, “Yeah, yeah, we did it!”

“You just moved your finger for thirty seconds. What? Really, you’re this excited?”

“You said that was easy. That... That was tricky.”

“You’re right, you’re right. It wasn’t easy. But let’s look at what you accomplished: you just focused on one tiny little thing for thirty full seconds. You’ve never done that in your life. *And* you did it with a whole group of people, all together! You’ve never done that in your whole life! I’ve got a few other things I wanted to teach you. Do you want to learn them?”

“All right, sure, yeah, okay.”

I ended up staying for three months teaching them four hours a day. The transformation was phenomenal. You could not recognize them from the beginning to the end. Every single one of those guys—here they are—every single one of them went on to finish school and get jobs. Many of them are performing professionally and are teaching the next generation. It was phenomenal. It was absolutely amazing. Here they are in a little more disciplined class. [Shows pictures.]

I went on and said, “This has to happen all over the world.”

So I started Promethean Spark International, which teaches essential life skills to impoverished youth worldwide through training in the performing arts. That experiential learning process that makes it so they can say, “I am disciplined, I am goal setting, I do that. It’s not just something I’ve heard about.”

We’ve been able to partner with some amazing places—some of you know about Rising Star Outreach of India. We actually have the president here, Tyler. We are excited to be working with them. For the past eight years we’ve been running programs in leprosy colonies in India.

Impossible dreams I didn’t know enough to dream about.

I’ve been teaching life skills through dance to these kids. Here is a picture of some of the beginning stages of the teaching process while we’re over there. We started the first ever dance troupe created out of youth from leprosy colonies, in the history of the world!

Impossible dreams I didn’t know enough to dream about.

They have now performed for over thirteen thousand people. They are lifting the stigma of leprosy off the minds of the masses. They’re on the front lines of the battle of getting rid of leprosy, eradicating it in the world. They’re amazing pioneers of today.

Here we are in the prisons in Kenya, working with the seventeen to twenty-one-year-olds. Also in the slums. I was actually there during the civil war of Kenya. I had to go into hiding. For those weeks that I was in hiding, they gave me their clothing off their back. They gave me a place to live. They gave me their beds; they slept on the floor so I could sleep in their beds. They gave me food to eat.

And I taught them. I gave them what I had to give. These kids should have been killing each other; they were on opposite sides. Instead we were in a little corrugated tin hut, learning how to work together and to set goals and to have tolerance and collaboration.

One of them, this kid right here, eleven-year-old Gilbert Njoroge. I just talked to him on Facebook yesterday. He's seventeen years old now. He finished high school on scholarship, and he is, today, taking his exams to see how well he will do to get into University.

Here he is, on another trip. I showed up, and he literally ran in the dirt road in the streets towards me and gave me a big hug. I didn't recognize him. It had been three years since I'd seen him, and he gave me a big hug. I took him to the prison with me where I was going to teach classes, and I was struggling a bit with the language.

He speaks Swahili—think about that, hmm, he lives there—so he took over and said, “I've got this, don't worry.”

I stepped back. He was younger than all of the inmates, and he stood up there and explained these principles and how they're applying in his life. How he made it work for him in school and education and how he's now helping his grandmother to pay rent. There he is, teaching.

Another dream that I never, ever, ever could have dreamed about.

I was doing a lecture tour across Northern India, and I got an email from Dr. Yugandhar, who is the president of the Council for the World United. He said, “I've heard about what you've been doing, and we would like to invite you to come and speak at the World Parliament on Spirituality. Are you going to be around? Can you come to Hyderabad for that?”

“Uhh, sure. When is it?”

I accepted to speak about disabilities and spirituality, and arts and culture and spirituality. I arrived and was able to share what we take for granted with these other people who understand that this age of enlightenment is coming. All of these amazing people—another dream that I had no idea about.

This will be the last one, and then we'll wrap it up. The Church asked me to grow this beard, just so you all know. It really doesn't matter, but it is a cool thing that they asked me to grow it first to be Stephen.

They said, “Would you be Stephen, please?”

I said, “Okay.”

Then right before, they said, “Actually, there's a change. Would you mind being the penitent thief crucified next to Christ?”

“Umm, okay.” Stoned to death to crucified. “Okay, sure.”

I came in and it was one of the most spiritual, amazing, powerful experiences I've ever had: hanging on a cross, turning and looking at Christ and being told, “See you in Paradise.”

So powerful. Beautiful.

Then right after that, I was supposed to teach at BYU-Hawaii, and I wasn't allowed to have the beard. Right before I cut it, I moved to Hawaii, and it happened to be that my landlady was a photographer.

She said, “Let's take some pictures.” We decided, “Let's do it like Christ.”

Some really cool things happened with that that I'll talk about in a fireside sometime. The new series is out called “Meditation of Christ.” I had no idea that ever as an artist would I be able to portray my Savior. Here are some of the pictures that are now out and available to share the light of Christ.

[Shows pictures.]

I had no idea—*no idea*—that these things were in my path. There was no way. All these experiences, and this journey—I had no way to be able to dream about when I was growing up. I'm still that podunk kid from Mesa, Arizona. That kid, the hair kid. I'm still that kid who put the dance belt over his tights. That's me! I take ownership; that's me. The path I've been led down has not been a path I could have dreamed about.

I wrote a quick little thing, and we'll end on this.

I've traveled much of the world living in palaces and slums,  
dined with kings and beggars.  
I have held a dying child in my arms and carried  
mutilated bodies from the devastation of war.  
I have performed with world-class artists on Broadway stages and  
danced with traumatized victims of human trafficking.  
I have lifted survivors from the rubble of the World Trade Center and  
bathed with Hindu priests in the waters of the sacred Ganges.  
I have gone into hiding in the slums during the Civil War of Kenya,  
danced and sung with my brothers in African prisons  
and rubbed shoulders with  
Hindu Swamis, Taoist Priests, Buddhist Monks, and Sun God Gurus while  
presenting at  
World Parliaments and Global Summits.  
I have seen the awe inspiring Wonders of the World but none inspired  
me more than the wonder in the eyes of  
an orphan child yearning to learn.  
I have received standing ovations from tens of thousands  
over the years  
but the most memorable ovations have come from  
toothless grandmothers smiling and tearful hugs  
in remote leprosy colonies in India.

What really matters? How can we use what has been given to us? Neither fame nor fortune; power nor prestige; health, wealth, nor wisdom have any redeeming value as an end unto themselves—only as a means to an end: lifting humanity.

You all have impossible dreams that as you will go out, will become possible. I ask you to open your mind to the limitless. Your future is filled with impossible dreams that you cannot dream about yet.

Thank you for coming.