

An Invitation to Move

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The class began in a circle. The teacher was explaining something about the body, but I wasn't really paying attention to what she was saying. I was carefully eyeing the other students in the room, trying to get an idea of what to expect from the next sixty minutes. As I looked around at each of them, I grew more confused. The drastic differences in body shape, size, and age of the others in the room only added to the mystery. There was a twenty-something-year-old woman, a woman who looked to be in her seventies, and a funny looking middle-aged man wearing a headband.

The class began with slow music. The teacher demonstrated movements simple enough for me to follow. As the class went on, the music sped up, and the movements did, too. I no longer felt like I could follow – I had no idea what I was supposed to do with my feet or which direction I was supposed to go in! I was overwhelmed and convinced that I was doing it all wrong. Everyone else in the room seemed comfortable, flinging their bodies back and forth in sync with the beat. When the class was over, I looked up to find the instructor walking towards me.

“Congratulations on completing your first Nia class, you did great!” the teacher said with a smile. I politely thanked her and started gathering my things to head home; I had no idea at that moment that Nia would alter the course of my life. Nia is a whole body fitness practice. What guides the practice is the sensation of pleasure derived through movement, and the goal of Nia is to find health through movement. The practice is inspired from nine movement modalities coming from the fields of dance, healing, and martial arts. Nia teaches that sensations are our body's way of communicating to us – of letting us know what nourishes it and what causes it pain.

I began attending Nia classes regularly; I would drop my kids off to their preschool in the suburbs of Houston, and then I'd head straight to class. What kept drawing me to the classes was the strong sense of relief that I found through the practice – not to mention the sense of freedom and joy as well. Movement began to serve as an outlet for me to express my emotions, to be silly, and to connect with others in a loving and inclusive community. When I learned that my family and I would be moving back to Saudi Arabia, I decided that I wanted to take Nia back to the Kingdom with me; I completed the first levels of teacher training and earned my white and blue belts.

I was glad to learn more about the practice that was changing my relationship to my body. Nia helped me feel comfortable in my own skin. It taught me not to shy away from expression, and it helped me let go of feeling shame in relation to my body. It also re-taught me how to play! I have been teaching Nia in Dhahran for over five years now, and I absolutely love sharing Nia with others, especially in the Saudi community. My goal is to contribute to the creation of a vibrant moving community here in Saudi Arabia.

Teaching Nia gave me the confidence to be who I am and to share what I know with others. It gave me an inner personal power that I'd never felt before: a strong sense of confidence and purpose. I knew I was good at something, and I felt obliged to share it with the members of my community. I asked a friend of mine, who is a psychologist, for advice on ways to share Nia with a more diverse selection of community members. She suggested that I volunteer at the hospital she worked for. I began regularly going to the psychiatry department and participating in the patient outreach program. I introduced a twenty-minute movement class to help the patients move and get out of their minds. I began each class by saying, "My name is Manal, and today we will be *moving*, not exercising. There is no right or wrong way to do this. This is simply a chance to explore the way your body moves!"

I had the pleasure of witnessing the positive effects of Nia on many of the patients and staff members at the hospital. Even if the effect was temporary, it was real. I encouraged them to get in touch with their bodies, to imagine where they wanted to be and what they wanted to do, and to be creative with how they used their bodies. Most of all, I encouraged them to play! And we played a lot. My experiences teaching Nia and facilitating movement sessions at the hospital helped me realize how much we suffer when we don't move. We suffer when we don't laugh, don't dance, or don't play; we disconnect from our bodies and limit ourselves to the confining space of our mind. It's like having a huge house and only using one room.

The body mind connection has become more and more evident in recent years. Most therapists and mental health professionals are aware that we can't fully heal using our minds alone – we need our bodies, too. Modern society has restricted our movement and our ability to express ourselves through our bodies. We've become accustomed to sitting down for hours, staring at screens for copious amounts of time, and dreading forms of movement. This phenomenon is not limited to Saudi or to the Arab world – it's worldwide. As humans, we are not meant to be sedentary – whether that happens through sitting at a desk, driving, or watching TV for hours each day.

When I speak about movement, many immediately translate that to mean exercising, or to going to the gym. I have nothing against those practices, but I certainly don't see them as the only ways to move. Similar to movement, dance has been squeezed into a tiny rigid box by society; it is either seen as a formal and strict art, like ballet, or as a flirtatious and seductive show that is labeled as forbidden in our society. To truly understand what movement and dance mean, we should look at a two-year-old child. At that age, the constrictions of society and cultural norms have not yet been formed; a child moves spontaneously to different sounds, and expresses his or her emotions fully without inhibition.

We learn from that child that it is our natural right to move and to dance. We can't reach our full potential if we don't move. Movement helps us connect the dots, express our emotions, and find ourselves.

So here is my invitation to you. I invite you to move:

I invite you to get up and move, get up and dance.

Don't let someone define music and dance for you.

Make your own definition.

Let your breath be your guide, let your heartbeat be your music.

Turn on your favorite song or dance in silence, no matter what you choose, just get up and move.

If you don't know where to begin, ask your wrist how it moves.

Connect to your ankle and ask for guidance.

It doesn't matter how you move, just get up move.

It doesn't matter how you dance, just get up and dance.

Move your anger, move your fears, no matter what is the emotion just get up and move.

If you can't get up and move, just be still and witness yourself move.

Witness your blood dancing around, your breath moving in and out.

It doesn't matter how you move, just witness yourself move.

Witness with awe and wonder, how we are all designed to dance and move.

Nothing alive in this world is still, it is through movement we find ourselves.

And after you have danced and moved, come to stillness of mind and be grateful for this body that moves