

A Balancing Act

I was three when I learnt of balance.

I was a scrawny three-year old precariously holding her demi-*plié* or *aramandi*, perhaps the single most important posture in Bharatanatyam, an Indian classical dance form. With my torso and hips in alignment I grinned, sitting deeper, pushing my *aramandi* past my threshold. I was eager to do my best. But my knees buckled and before I knew it I was stumbling. My smile faltered. “Remaining balanced is not a matter of remaining rigid”, my guru soothed. “It is a matter of small adjustments. At every step you *have* to shift your weight, stamping on one foot and then the other.”

Not being thrown off, I spent long hours fine-tuning my craft. In my devotion to practice, I learnt of time-management. Every second, like every beat, counted. Often, this meant finishing homework while inching through busy Kuala Lumpur traffic. It meant conjugating Thai verbs backstage. And it meant braving through thundery Singapore showers for the pursuit of two diplomas, one for high school and one for dance. When college acceptances rolled in, my excitement to pursue Aerospace at Georgia Tech was amplified by the prospect of auditioning for their nationally acclaimed dance team GT Pulse. You can only imagine the shock, honor and thrill when early September I received an email prefaced with, ‘We are so excited to say that ...’. Did this mean that I would be one of the dancers in their next video? I giddily reloaded their most recent performance. The mythology came alive on stage, a snake head coiling in unison to music unlike anything the classical circuit had ever heard before. The video concluded as they ran to the front to receive their trophy which applauded their vision and creativity.

I was seventeen when I learnt of balance.

I was the only girl in the Design-Build-Fly lecture, sitting fresh-faced front row. It was not compulsory, but it was the only course that gave students an essence of the full spectrum of the aerospace degree. Immediately after an hour we filed down to a lab lined with previous accolades and applied what we learnt. Here we were welcome to stay indefinitely. After all GT DBF garnered nothing less than second place at both AIAA and SAE competitions. Attending was a no-brainer. After covering notation we were onto the concept of the center of gravity. “How did varying its position affect the performance of an aircraft?”, our lecturer Carl inquired. I scrambled to draw the plane’s balancing act, its lift and its weight, glancing at the board for the answer. My smile faltered. “Balance is *not* equal and opposite forces”, he declared, amused at our reactions. “It is in fact three forces in dynamic tension. Don’t forget the down force.”

On my flight to success I had rationed that for my desired lift, I needed to further increase my angle of attack. Busy meant better. My passion and skills thrust me to captaincy in dance and I became the first sophomore captain GT Pulse had seen in its eight-years. Lift came from leading the team to placing in the top three, twice. But quite like aircraft, my life became a series of loading compromises. Nine-hours spent dancing and eight-hours spent building weighed down upon me. Physics began to explain the realities of my life. It was not a balancing act of two nationally acclaimed teams, GT Pulse and GT DBF. Rather it was the tension between dance, Design-Build-Fly and my coursework. My desired success and lift in school felt compromised by both the weight and down force of my teams. This is when I realized that I had misunderstood balance all along. It was never about giving equal weight to all things. After accomplishing captaincy, I took a step away from Bharatanatyam and towards Design-Build-Fly. I desired to no longer compete with GT Pulse but to perform on occasions. My consistent involvement in GT DBF catapulted me to becoming the Wing lead. Lift came once again as I became in charge of organizing the parallel development of a latch mechanism and buckle mechanism for making the wings lock into place.

I was twenty when I learnt of balance.

I was an Instagram blogger publishing articles geared at a growing demographic of influencers and change-makers. This was my runway for thought and I thought critically. I advocated for women in STEM; I discussed being lost in conversation with a stranger in rural Germany about passion; and I kept an honest and fresh perspective on productivity. I wrote to hold myself accountable in striking a balance between the mind, body and soul. I wrote to demonstrate to myself my capacity for unwavering determination in school. I accompanied these articles with vibrant photos taken across three continents. In curating inspirational content for my blog and my work for UN Women, I found Brooke Owens. No amount of time would suffice for her to do all that she wanted to do. This deeply resonated with me. In dance, Design-Build-Fly and school I have stumbled numerous times. But my passion for aviation and my desire and enthusiasm to make a difference in this industry has not waivered through it. In my quest to move forward with my vision and exposure, I am determined to make an impact regardless of drag. However it is not enough for me concentrate on the lifts I accomplished by shifting my weight. My purpose is to thrust forward, surpassing boundaries.