

**PERSPECTIVE: Walking Toward the Light**  
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**New York**

*In life, we must grit our teeth and walk bravely toward the light. This is the spirit of a genuine artist. If life goes smoothly all the time, we risk growing arrogant and conceited. Such a shallow individual cannot produce truly outstanding art. I hope that arts division members will live with bright optimism and steadfast determination. (SGI President Ikeda, April 10 World Tribune)*

Shuffle hop step flap step, shuffle hop flap ball-change.... Lift your knees!!!...she would yell through the dance studio.... Light, clear sounds.... Think UP, the rhythm is positive, HAPPY!

And then Mary-Jane Brown, my tap teacher who was already in her late 60s, would demonstrate the steps, and she would melt your heart.

I used to call her the female Astaire — dazzling footwork and all the elegance and class in the world. When I came to New York in 1984 with a grant from the Dutch government to specialize in musical theater, she was one of the dance teachers highly recommended to me. In the first class I fell in love with the way she moved, the sound of her taps, her great teaching skills and wonderful sense of humor. From then on I was in just about every class she taught, because that's how I wanted to learn to dance.

I'd follow her to many different studios in the "dance belt" of Manhattan, as studios kept closing because of skyrocketing real-estate prices in the '80s. But as long as there was a floor, Mary-Jane would teach. When her husband fell ill and she had to take him regularly to the hospital for kidney dialysis, the number of classes she taught diminished but never her enthusiasm and commitment.

Then in 1992, as she was about to start a new season at a new school, I received a phone call from her: "It's all over now — I have cancer," she said.

She and her husband moved to Baltimore where she could have her daughter's support while she was going through chemotherapy and her husband through dialysis. Hospital visits now became her daily routine. The treatments were rough and left her frail, but it was far from over. She slowly regained her strength, and even before she was declared cancer-free, she started tap dancing again. I would call and tell her that it was so wonderful that she was dancing again, and she'd say, "My pullbacks aren't what they used to be."

Next thing I knew, she was back teaching at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore. There were no professional dancers in that classroom, but she would teach with the same dedication as ever. Very quickly she had an enthusiastic group of followers there as well. When I traveled through Washington, D.C., with the national tour of *My Fair Lady*, Mary-Jane came to see her "disciple" perform. She was always supportive of her students.

In 1994 her husband died. Yet another battle she courageously fought. Mary-Jane never stopped moving. She missed the hustle and bustle of New York, she said, and so she came to Manhattan to teach several master classes. Every time there was a huge turnout of old friends and students, and we'd all be dancing up a storm, inspired by Mary-Jane.

In the beginning of 1997, her cancer was back. Again she had to have surgery and chemotherapy. Throughout she continued to teach. When she became too weak, her daughter would demonstrate. She finished the school term at Peabody Institute and attended the closing performance, even though the cancer had now spread throughout her body.

In June I found out she had been admitted to a hospice. I hopped on a train for what I

knew would be my last visit. We reminisced and laughed about the good old days; we watched Fred Astaire dance on video, and she showed me pictures of her younger years when she danced with the Tommy Dorsey Band and Bob Crosby. She wanted to know everything I was doing. Then she took my hand and told me that it was very important for her to say goodbye, and that she felt I had learned what she had to give. Now I had to make it my own. I felt so fortunate to be there and to thank her for everything she had given me. I left Baltimore with much appreciation.

On July 12 Mary-Jane died at age 80, as gracefully as she had lived, with her daughter at her bedside. Mary-Jane Brown, my hero, I not only want to dance like you, I want to live like you with “the spirit of a genuine artist.” I’ll do my best to continue that positive rhythm of clear sounds and keep walking “bravely toward the light.”

**WT**

Title: Perspective: Walking Toward the Light  
Subject: World Tribune 05/22/98 n.3192 p.3 WT980522p03 New York  
Author: Sjoerd Alexander de Jong  
Keywords: Career Dancers Experiences January June Light Perspectives Toward Tribune Viewpoint  
Walking World York