

[WHEN FEELING WRONG IS RIGHT: HOW CHOREOGRAPHER QUILAN ‘CUE’ ARNOLD PLAYS WITH RESPONSIBILITY](#)

By: Quilan “Cue” Arnold
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Note: This article is presented as part of the ALL ARTS program “[Alvin Ailey New Directions](#)” by filmmaker Steven Tabakin. The eight-part digital series follows choreographers [Quilan “Cue” Arnold](#) and [Maria Bauman](#) as they work with dancers from The Ailey School as part of their [New Directions Choreography Lab](#) residencies. Here, Arnold shares further insight into his process.

I encourage you to take a moment and reflect upon your most beautiful memories as a kid. What were the games you played? What were the songs you sang? What were the plays you performed? Who were the people, or what were the times, that arose the most jubilant joy from your soul? Do you remember what it was like to surrender to that warmth?



I remember my joy coming from the particular privilege of not having to care. I could just be. My parents, my teachers and other elders created environments for me to roam free without worry. I loved, I wandered, I wondered, I played, I took risks, I got hurt, I cried, I laughed, and I grew.

And then a new word came into my existence as I grew older. A word that gets us to do our taxes on time, or stresses us out if we don’t. A word that can suck the fun out of everything in the name of keeping roofs over our heads, clothes on our bodies and food on our tables. Yeah, the word is “responsibility” ... UGH!

I remember being taught that growing up meant embracing responsibility and letting go of child-like carelessness. I was provided scripture from the Bible like 1 Corinthians 13:11 — “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” I remember thinking of the author, “Paul, you became borrrriiiiiing!”

I had a rough relationship with this concept because I wasn’t finished holding on to the child-like carelessness I came to love. Responsibility gave me the same feeling as when I was told I had to eat all of my vegetables. Not the good veggies like corn, but the monstrosities like lima beans! Know-it-all elders said it was good for me, but how could something that felt so wrong be so right? I didn’t understand.

In college I found a deep love for dance, and my perspective about responsibility shifted drastically. I became obsessed with becoming better, but I didn’t embody the discipline necessary to match my mind’s desire. This dissonance created a war in my soul that lasted 10 years (between 2010-2020). I disliked myself for being, what I would’ve labeled as, irresponsible about my dance progress.



When I was in university, I got by academically and psychologically because I was in structured environments, and I found pride in being the Black hip-hop unicorn in a Eurocentric setting. However, once I had to create my own structure ... forget about it! I had a hard time putting in the effort to see sustainable change. And on the rare occasion I did, then I would often go too hard. My progress constantly halted as I either exhausted or injured myself. I was existing in an inner-state where that carefree desire I was holding onto was ironically enemy #1, and the spirit of responsibility became a prized enigma that I struggled to understand.

The New Directions Choreography Lab entered my life as my relationship to responsibility, and thus play, began to shift. I was the final artist in residence during March of 2020, when COVID-19 had us sheltered in place. That season gave me an opportunity of a lifetime. It silenced most distractions and provided a me-vs.-me match-up. If I was going to understand responsibility and grow a healthy relationship to it, then there was no better moment than then.

With community, I found praxis to align my conceptual identity with my behavioral identity: Jesus follower, dancer, liberator, artist, son, brother and more. I continued studying my Bible daily. I committed to rest and the sabbath; letting my Holy Spirit converse with my mind about how all these identifiers intertwined to serve the world. I challenged myself to dance every day for 366 days, and I missed less than a week. Many of those days were spent with my elder, Sekou Heru, who constantly taught me “one day at a time, nephew.” And one day at a time I showed up, I worked, I cried, I wondered, I fought, I screamed, and I grew. I was studying “[Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#)” by Paulo Freire, and like everyone and their mama I was on JEDI calls (Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion). I was on weekly calls with my parents, and I was on daily calls with my sister.

My daily praxis in aligning my conceptual identity with my behavioral identity created an inner-sanctuary that allowed my child self to roam freely. Wow, I’m just realizing I was becoming the caretaker who my child self fully trusts. And guess what showed up as a result? Play! As I finally understood the kind of caretaker I wanted to be for myself, my Holy Spirit revealed a spirit of play that hid in my past.

Right on time, too, as my guest residency at Alvin Ailey’s New Directions Choreography Lab, take 2, was soon approaching! I was excited because I felt like I made a revelation in my Truth, and I questioned how to curate a movement-centered space for others to find theirs. And here is where I leave you to witness the ALL ARTS “Alvin Ailey New Directions” docu-series as it captures a bit of how our community did that during the seven-week residency. But, before I do, I’ll offer a few thoughts on how I found my Truths, with the hope that it inspires you in some way.

Please contact me through email (cue4christ@gmail.com) and/or Instagram (@[cue4christ](https://www.instagram.com/cue4christ))! I’d love to be in dialogue about how you engage with these thoughts and how you go about finding your truths!

Finding My Truths/Identifiers:

I have to understand the truths/identifiers (T/I) that give me life. I don’t mean “understand” as just a conceptual “getting it.” I also mean “understand” as in an embodied “standing under.” I had to show up, and stand under, certain T/I like a disciple so the spirit of the T/I could shower me a little more with their presence, their character and their essence. It reminds me of something Miyamoto Musashi said in “[The Book of Five Rings](#),” and I paraphrase: “The more you give yourself to the spirit, the more it will give itself to you.”

I have to distinguish T/I that are a choice, those that are not, and those that are in-between. This process requires experimentation and often challenging T/I that were authoritatively provided to me as a kid from my parents and close elders. I praise God for protection because I have experimented with spirits that did not give me life, that could ruin my life as I knew it, and/or maybe some that could have taken my life all together. I believe God has blessed me with two gifts that have guided me as I experiment:

The gift of love: No truth that is not loving is for me.

The gift of inquisitiveness: I’ve learned to gain enough insight about certain spirits by asking others who have engaged with them. Doing so provides me the power to discern whether I want to engage or not without understanding the spirit deeply myself.

As I find the T/I I want to be committed to, then I have a responsibility to get to know the spirit behind them. My commitment includes an execution of self-control, discipline and love so that the T/I spirit can reveal itself more to me and its characteristics can live deeper within me.

Stream all eight episodes of “Alvin Ailey New Directions” on the ALL ARTS [site](#) and [app](#).