

Dancing Into the Divine

For dancer-turned-minister Adriene Thorne, movement is healing.

BY TRACY E. HOPKINS

Prior to pivoting to the pulpit, Reverend Adriene Thorne—the first African American woman to become senior minister of the interdenominational Riverside Church in New York City—danced with Dance Theatre of Harlem, performed in musical theater, and was a high-kicking Radio City Rockette. Although she untied her pointe shoes long ago, the classically trained dancer uses her artistic background to inform her spiritual work.

Before Thorne delivers one of her poetic and powerful homilies, which often center hard conversations about white supremacy and gender equality, she invites her congregants to do an embodied practice of release by shaking out their limbs and taking a series of deep breaths. “I’ve always had a sense that movement is healing,” she says. “We know that trauma lives in our bodies. But I don’t think that folks are aware that trauma will only get healed in the body. You’ve got to notice your body and do practices like deep breathing and stretching and releasing to start to heal your trauma. That has been enormously helpful for me, so I bring that to my work. When I say, ‘Let’s take a deep breath,’ so many people haven’t breathed deeply all week long.”

The 57-year-old Washington, DC, native was raised Catholic and even considered becoming a nun. “The Ten Commandments were my jam,” she says. As a youngster, however, she set her sights on becoming a ballerina. And her mother, Marilyn, who passed away in 2024, encouraged her eldest child to pursue that passion.

I started in a studio in Maryland with a wonderful ballet teacher. My teacher told my mother, “Adriene is going to be a ballerina.” It’s so important what adults say to and about children. I remember thinking, Yeah, I am. I had very good technique and training.

At the School of American Ballet, they told me, “You’re going to be too tall to be a ballerina.” My mother, who grew up in the South and was the daughter of sharecroppers, was sitting with my no-nonsense Russian teacher. My mother asked me, “Adriene, what do you think about this?” In tears, I’m like, “I think I’m really great.” My mother turned to this woman and



Reverend Adriene Thorne at Riverside Church, and as a Rockette



said, “Thank you very much for your opinion,” and then we walked out. It’s pretty amazing that my mom, who knew nothing about ballet, checked in with me and made me feel like this wasn’t the final story.

I trained with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, which is Arthur Mitchell’s company. Mitchell was [the first Black principal dancer] at New York City Ballet, but when Dr. King was assassinated, he said “What can I do?” And he started a school for Black and brown children in Harlem. I went there in the summers and wanted to come back.

I danced with the Rockettes at the end of my career, in 2000 and 2001. The music hall holds over 5,000 people. After 9/11, we would get standing ovations right when we hit the stage because people were so hungry for the quintessential American thing. But the world was on fire, and I felt like I needed to do something more substantial. That’s when I started thinking about grad school. I thought I was going to get an MFA in literature, connected to my undergrad degree. But I made my way to seminary instead. Healing has always been my calling; I’ve known that since I was 6.

What I loved most about dance is the precision. When I went to seminary, you had to do psychological testing before you can be ordained as a clergy person. My testing revealed that I have obsessive-

compulsive tendencies. I was like, “Oh, no, they’re not going to ordain me.” And the psychologist said, ‘No, this means you’re someone who is attentive to detail.’ I think that’s what I loved about ballet. We always started in first position and with our left hand on the bar. I am methodical. I found the precision very comforting.

Artists are among the most spiritual people I know. You don’t do what dancers do with our bodies without a supernatural belief in yourself and belief in a holy force to get you up, over, and around a stage. For me, I don’t know where else to attribute the creativity, the ability, the power of what I did but the divine. I’ve performed ill and injured and come off stage with no memory of how I did it. The same thing has happened for me in the pulpit—an out-of-body experience where I am carried and lifted and elevated.

There were times when my worst offering was the offering that changed someone’s life or moved them to tears. How does one explain that? Yes, I trained for decades. Yes, I researched and studied. Yes, I prepared and rehearsed over and over and over again until I could do the steps blindfolded on a wind-tossed ship. And still there were moments that I could not explain, where I was not alone, where I jumped higher, turned faster, preached better than anything I could have imagined. On the stage, in the pulpit, in life, I have always felt a force, a power, looking out for me. ■

From left: Corrie Aune, Courtesy Thorne; Courtesy Thorne