

Medium

Jacquelin Harris Of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater On The Morning Routines and Habits Of Highly Successful People

By: Jake Frankel

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Morning routine creates discipline. How you begin the day sets up how focused and productive you can be later on. Creating a sense of purpose with your morning routine sets you up to meet your goals, ultimately boosting your self-esteem in the moment and for the future.

Beginnings are a Genesis. That means that not only are they a start, but they are also the origin of all that follows. This means that the way we start something, the way we start our day, for example, creates a trajectory for all that follows. How do highly successful leaders start their day in a way that creates a positive trajectory for a successful, effective, productive, and efficient day? How do you

create habits that make these routines permanent? How do you get inspired to develop the discipline necessary for such a lifestyle? In this new series, called Morning Routines and Habits Of Highly Successful People, we are talking to successful leaders who can share the morning routines and habits that have helped them to achieve success.

As a part of this series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Jacquelin Harris

Jacquelin Harris began her dance training at Dance Productions Studios under the direction of Lori Long. Harris received a silver ARTS award from the National Foundation for the Advancement of the Arts and was a Presidential Scholar in the Arts semifinalist. She graduated with honors from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program in Dance. In 2016, Harris was named one of “25 to Watch” by Dance Magazine. She received a 2017 dance fellowship from the Princess Grace Foundation-USA. Harris has performed as a guest artist with Twyla Tharp, the Merce Cunningham Trust, and Roderick George. She was a member of Ailey II and joined the Company in 2014.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive into the main focus of our interview, our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood backstory?

I was born and raised in Charlotte, North Carolina with my four sisters, mother and father. My home was often open to my extended family, so in addition to my large family I found myself living with cousin, nieces, and nephews. I found dance at the age of 2 at Dance Productions Performing Arts Studio and trained there until I graduated high school. Dance quickly became my passion, and I performed competitively throughout my adolescence. I graduated from Fordham University with a BFA in dance while training at The Ailey School. My family led with a great example of determination, resilience, and dedication to academia, your craft, and your future.

What or who inspired you to pursue your career? We’d love to hear the story.

I have always had a love for dance. As a child I danced recreationally and competitively. It was not until my mentor and ballet teacher Denise Britz-Clark encouraged me to submit to YoungArts (National Foundation for the Advancement of the Arts) my senior year of high school that I saw pre professional artists who trained with the goal of making dance their career. Ms. Denise was the first to show me videos of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and encouraged me to audition for Fordham University. Under her guidance, I saw dance as being a viable career path.

None of us can achieve success without some help along the way. Was there a particular person who you feel gave you the most help or encouragement to be who you are today? Can you share a story about that?

In competition dance, we are often taught to dance full out and to do the choreography as given. Seldom were we given the permission to investigate the work individually. Courtney Turner saw my passion and gave me space to

explore. She took me under her wing and instilled curiosity and ownership into my movement. I believe those are the qualities that brought me to the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; and I still hold them with me today. During private rehearsals, she would create a space for me to think about how I wanted to tell my story through movement. Without giving me exactly what to do, she encouraged me to be curious and get to know myself as best as I can so that my story reads clearly to the audience. At the time, I thought I needed her to tell me what to do by offering examples of how to shade and color my movement, but she left me to think for myself. At the end of that rehearsal, I clearly understood that my voice is unique. It is powerful. I have all the tools that I need in my own imagination to further my art.

Can you share the funniest or most interesting mistake that occurred to you in the course of your career? What lesson or take away did you learn from that?

In my line of work, mistakes happen often. Sometimes you are not on balance, or your prop doesn't work, or you end up in the wrong spot. It is all a part of live theater. What I find most important is to stay in the story, move with intention; and if you do that the audience will never know the difference. I have the honor of performing Mr. Ailey's iconic work *Cry*, which he created as a birthday present to his mother and was made famous by Judith Jamison's interpretation. The opening entails a long white cloth which symbolizes many different things, a body, a burden, a crown, or an anchor. In one moment, I am supposed to throw the cloth and hang my head over it, heavy in despair. I could not get the cloth over my head. I kept trying. But inside my mind I knew I was supposed to be in despair. So, I let the audience see how the cloth was another burden. Albeit in that moment it was a burden to me, not the character but I chose to let that story carry my mistake. I learned that mistakes are not really mistakes if you are so invested in your mission, for me the story telling. They are investigation.

You are a successful leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?

To me, leadership starts with understanding. I find that it is most effective when I understand what people are trying to achieve. Sometimes I ask my fellow dancers what they are feeling or what they see when they dance in order to understand the baseline. It's important to make sure everyone is working toward the same goal and making sure that goal is a universal need. Personal accountability aligns to purpose. Secondly, a good leader must be solution oriented. Being able to understand different perspectives and direct everyone toward the same goal effectively takes problem solving skills. It is important to remain calm in unexpected circumstances and allowing the focus to be on the solutions. Lastly, an effective leader leads by example. Being impeccable with your intention allows people to see the goal and rise.

I'm an author and I believe that books have the power to change lives. Do you have a book in your life that impacted you and inspired you to be an effective leader? Can you share a story?

"A New Earth" by Eckhart Tolle changed the way I view the world. He breaks down the idea of ego and sense of self. He reminds us that our perception of the world is just that, our perception. He gives us back the power to shape our circumstances and how we respond to them. Through this book, I found the sense of unity with my community and my environment that I think is instrumental in being a good leader. Additionally, the book shows how to shape the mind, thinking and understanding, so that we are always operating from a place of abundance. Abundance of inspiration and abundance of possibilities which fuel productivity.

What are some of the most interesting or exciting projects you are working on now? How do you think that might help people?

Right now, I am on a three month tour with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. This season is dedicated to the life and legacy of Judith Jamison, who transition in November of 2024. I am reminded every day of the impact one singular human being can make on a culture and on a community. She has influenced the way the American people receive dance. She has shaped the way African American culture is celebrated around the globe following Mr. Ailey's (our founder) footsteps in making this organization a cultural ambassador of the world. They did so by boldly telling

their stories. Making sure the audience saw their human spirit through their culture. And I think people can always be reminded of our collective humanity. We are better together.

OK, thank you for all of that. Let's now shift to the core focus of our interview. This will be intuitive to you but it will be helpful to spell this out directly. Can you help explain to our readers why it is important to have a consistent morning routine?

Morning routine creates discipline. How you begin the day sets up how focused and productive you can be later on. Creating a sense of purpose with your morning routine sets you up to meet your goals, ultimately boosting your self-esteem in the moment and for the future.

Can you please share your optimal morning routine that can create a positive trajectory for a successful, effective, productive, and efficient day. If you can, please share some stories or examples.

Because I have an active lifestyle, it is important for me to start each morning with fuel and taking care of my body. I like to drink a glass of water first thing in the morning. Hydration wakes up the mind and the body right away. It's like watering a flower after neglecting it for a while. Like leaves, our internal systems brighten ready for the day. Then I will have breakfast and my morning coffee. Breaking fast with a healthy breakfast of eggs and fruit fuels the mind, preparing me for the endurance of the day. From there, I like to do an at home workout, typically mat Pilates. Right away I am engaging my muscles. If I start the day engaged, it makes not only dancing at work easier but also simple tasks like walking to and from the subway in NYC. When my body feels pain free, I can put my attention elsewhere. From there, I head to work for Company class where I can train my body and also focus my mind. I like to use class as a meditation, to center myself into the present moment. Once I am fueled, engaged, and centered I can be present through the day.

Speaking in general, what is the best way to develop good habits? Conversely, how can one stop bad habits?

Developing good habits first starts with trying them out. Even if you aren't sure if they are right for you, try them. You will find something that sticks. Even small changes can have lasting impact. A healthy routine starts with effort. I found the easiest way to stop bad habits to take notice of how your body feels with different habits. I used to drink a glass of wine every day. One day I didn't drink wine, and I noticed that my sleep improved exponentially. So, I stopped drinking daily. Then I started drinking water in the morning. I noticed my body responded immediately to being hydrated, therefore, I added water to my routine. Become so well acquainted with your vessel that you notice what is helpful and what isn't. Now, even when I want to have a glass of wine, I remember that some aspect of my health, whether mental or physical, will suffer and I usually make a different choice.

Doing something consistently "day in and day out" can be hard. Where did you get your motivation from? What do you use to motivate you now?

Burnout is real. But I try to make each day different. Even if the activity is the same, I give myself different inspiration each day. Monday I will focus on my technique. Tuesday I will focus on my intention, so on and so forth, noticing what worked yesterday and what can be improved tomorrow. Even when you do not have the capacity to give 100% of yourself, you can give 100% of your effort and that is meeting your goal. The curiosity that was instilled in me as a young girl still holds strong in my professional career and I am grateful I have an outlet to let my imagination fly.

What other resources would you suggest to our readers?

"Mindful Leadership" by Maria Gonzalez outlines how to prepare yourself to effectively inspire people around you. Another quick read, "The Four Agreements," by Don Miguel Ruiz concisely tells how to live a purposeful life and lead by example.

Ok, we are nearly done. You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

If I could inspire a movement, it would be to further encourage people of all ages and occupations to take care of their health. It is easy to get caught up in the fast pace of life, preparing for the future, but taking care of your body is primary and creates the meter of success. Not only does it create a positive physical body but generates a healthy mental body as well. Creativity, focus, and productivity grow in a healthy mind. It is important to remember that our mind is connected to our physical body for optimal performance.

We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US, whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we both tag them :-)

I would love to have a private breakfast with Keke Palmer. She has been consistent in her work ethic since she was a child actress, with a determined but also humble spirit. She has transcended generations without losing herself or what is important to her. A prime example of doing the work and trusting that the talent will speak for itself.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

You can find me on Instagram under @jacquelinh or dancing with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at ailey.org
Thank you!

Thank you for these really excellent insights, and we greatly appreciate the time you spent with this. We wish you continued success.