## Showing Off, Growing Up

## by Julia Wise

When I was a teenager, my family went to a folk dance week once a year. The young people there danced harder, stayed up later, and were generally way cooler than me. I desperately wanted to be a hotshot like them. Unfortunately, I was stuck in a town without much of that. I was the only young morris dancer within seventy miles. Our contra dances were infrequent and slow-paced. It was frustrating.

When I was sixteen, I had an email exchange with a young dancer in the Boston area. She complained about how the youth rapper sword team she danced with wasn't really her favorite, and she would prefer to be on one of the other youth rapper teams. My jaw dropped. There wasn't a sword team in my entire state, let alone one with anyone under thirty, and she was complaining? I vowed to move north as soon as I could.

At age twenty-two, my dreams were coming true. Everyone wanted to dance with me, I was engaged to a hot young folk dancer and musician from Boston, and we were working on the crew that summer at Pinewoods. Of course, I was also terrified because the other workers at Pinewoods had grown up doing all this. These were kids who had been hot dancers for a lot longer than I had.

The crew worked all day together setting up the camp, and at night we danced. We formed a crew rapper team, and I was sure I wouldn't be good enough. My boss, the one I wanted most to impress, was the best rapper dancer of us. I was sure she would lead the set. Instead, she asked me to take the number one position. When I bungled things, she coached me. I couldn't understand. She knew the most, by far—why wouldn't she want to take the lead?

Eventually, I figured it out. She had passed through her hotshot stage. She knew she was a better dancer than the rest of us, and wasn't interested in showing off. She was moving on to the teaching stage.

Last summer, my husband and I went to a contra dance together. It was pretty tame, as Boston dances go—not many dancers, not many young people. Jeff was calling, so I couldn't even dance with him. But there were a few beginners there, and I made it my mission to be sure they had a good time. In the process, I had a good time too. If I had only been at the dance for my own enjoyment or to show off, it would have been miserable.

There are dancers who stay obsessed with The Best forever. They don't want to dance with beginners. They want to dance the fastest and coolest they can, all the time. But the more mature ones move on, and start bringing out the best in others.

Julia Wise lives in Somerville, Massachusetts. This essay was originally published on her blog and is republished by permission.



English Dance Week, where sometimes song reigns. (Not related to Julia's delightful essay above, but a delightful photo by Michael Siemon, 2010.)