

Connecting and Letting Go and the Yin-Yang of Contra

by Lisa Marie Lunt

Last night I had an “Ah-ha” moment that was two years in the making: In order to make new connections, I had to let go of the old, dead connections. Easy to understand, difficult to practice.

I’ve been dancing for a little over two years. During the same time I’ve been practicing mindfulness meditation and have been grieving a profound loss. I have used meditation to help with grieving and letting go, sometimes more consistently than others. The “Ah-ha” happened last night after group meditation when Joanne Friday was talking about letting go. The dime dropped and I realized it had already happened. After two years of gradually letting go, it was gone. I was freed up to make new connections. A few weeks ago I started feeling a shift. I was open to connecting in a new way and I noticed it on and off the dance floor. Two weekends ago at dance camp my experience of dance changed. It was like everything went sparkly Technicolor, even though it was already full spectrum color to begin with. The LCFD* group had a lot to do with that, because in our dance community we connect well, and let’s face it, we’re a sparkly bunch! The brightness and color of the dance has continued on at the local dances I’ve attended since then.

Connecting and letting go are the yin and yang of contra, so it’s a great place to practice both. While the band plays lively music you listen to the caller’s instructions for the dance moves. In each 64-beat cycle that lasts about 30 seconds depending on the tempo, you connect multiple times for two to 16 beats with the other three people in your foursome. When the cycle is done you progress up or down the line with your partner to the next couple and repeat the 64-beat cycle. You continue progressing up and down the line, with a one cycle break at either end if you make it that far during the dance. The dances are usually around 10 to 15 minutes long. You’d have to be a mathematician and expert contra dancer and sit

down with a pen and paper during a dance to figure out how many potential interactions you might have in a three-hour evening with approximately ten contra dances, three to four minute short breaks between each dance to find a new partner and drink some water quickly, two waltzes lasting four to five minutes each, and a half hour break midway through the evening. I’d be willing to bet that one of my dance friends has figured it out and will post the variable calculations in the comments. Which do you think will win out, Harvard or MIT? I’m comfortable with just saying that there is a lot of connecting and letting go. A lot.



These interactions are all mini-adventures. How fun they are depends on dancers’ ability to interact and connect with each other and the group. Timing and form are important too. One of the most fun things about contra for me is when a neighbor sees my smile for the first time as they are progressing to dance with me. If they’re not already smiling their face usually lights up and they mirror my ear to ear smile. It doesn’t even seem to matter that I have a temporary filling on a broken front tooth. Maybe they notice it, maybe they don’t. Either way they are smiling. I tried keeping a

closed mouth smile to cover it, but it didn’t work. I can’t help it. The smile has to get out.

There are occasional special moments in contra when the dancers, caller and musicians all sync together. You can feel the palpating energy in the dance hall. Once the caller senses that enough of the group has the pattern down to continue without calling, s/he stops calling and stands back to watch the magic. The dancers move as a single organism in a pattern up and down the sets of lines. The musicians amp up the beat and volume, the dancers follow and the energy takes on a higher resonance. The dancers are silent except for the shuffle of feet moving in time together,

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the thighs, the shoulder joints (work the external rotation of the biceps to open the shoulders!), the upper back. Wherever you feel sensation, observe it. Keep your breath steady and smooth, always through the nose (unless your nasal passages are blocked). Stay in the pose as long as you can keep your focus on the individual actions; come out when your mind wanders. Take a few breaths, and go into the pose again. A second attempt is almost always more than twice as useful to your body!

Eventually, we seek to maintain each action simultaneously, attending to each one AND then to all of them at once. Attention (one point at a time), then Extension—the actions become more fluid with practice, and we can do more of them with ease. Each point in sequence, then all points at once.

The word “yoga” comes from the Sanskrit root word “yug,” meaning “to join.” We seek, eventually, to join the mind and the body, such that the body is receptive and fluid and the mind is gathered and still. The skill we develop from the work I outline above (engage one action, maintain it, add another action, and so on) draws our attention inward. This practice of drawing inward refreshes our chronically busy minds: when we focus on a specific action, we train our mind to narrow to one point. When we get more proficient at that narrowing of focus, we have a better chance at being able to calm the anxiety that often results from having too much stuff going on in our brains.

My students have taught me that a few minutes a day of attention to specific actions builds capacity, not only in increased physical comfort, but also in the ability to access a calmer mind. This pose needs only you and a counter, and I’ll bet most of you have that in your living space. You can even have your shoes on!

Bonus enticement for Over-Achievers: Once you’ve played with this pose, choose a pose from any of the last several columns (ideally one either that resonates with your body because you did it and it felt right, or one that looks like a pose you know would be good to work toward). Follow the same progression of Attention (to each specific action—maintaining the previous action as you are able) and Extension (as many actions as possible at once).

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punctuated by stomps on some of the fourth beats, or a double clap after a Petronella Twirl. That’s a group connection that can’t be fully explained. It has to be experienced. Something similar and magic can also happen to me with a waltz, when my partner and I connect to each other and the music, my partner is a strong lead and I am in step with the lead. In those moments I become a better dancer. I feel light on my feet, like I’m almost floating around the dance floor with my partner. Both of these types of experiences can only be described as transcendent.

I let go of a loss and it has opened me up to connections both on and off the dance floor. Life is a series of connections and losses that require letting go. Hopefully I’ll get better at it as I go. I’m sure life will provide me with plenty of opportunities to practice.

Let’s dance!

* Lavender Country and Folk Dance, <http://lcfld.org>

In late 2015, Lisa Lunt wrote a personal reflection on her Facebook page and subsequently offered it to us for publication in the CDSS News. It is a story of her experience with contra dance. Lisa has been dancing contras since August of 2013 “and it has been life changing for me...I have also done some English country dance and have enjoyed that as well. I have been thrilled to learn to waltz. I love love, LOVE contra dancing, but I live for a lovely waltz!”

A resident of Warren, RI, Lisa’s local dances are the Rehoboth, MA Contra Dance and the East Bay Contra Dance (Warren, RI). Her emotional “home” dance is the Jamaica Plain (Boston) Gender Free Contra, where she enjoys its sense of community. LCFD’s dance weekends at Becket, MA each October, and Woodstock, CT each May are a highlight of her dance year. Lisa does the programming of bands and callers for the JP Gender Free Contra and serves on the Board of Directors of the LCFD.

When not dancing, Lisa is a Reiki practitioner, jewelry artist and aromatherapist. Her new hobby is quilting. She is the mother of a 20-year-old adult child with special needs. As a chemically sensitive dancer she has promoted fragrance-free dance environments. She is currently working on a fragrance-free policy with the LCFD board and JP Contra organizers.

Her original post, with a beautiful graphic, is at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/lisa-marie-lunt/connecting-and-letting-go-and-the-yinyang-of-contra/10153660551152278?pnref=lhc>. The image, Lisa said, reminds her a four-hand star.