College Essay—Calling Dances

by Rose Axelrod-Adams

When I stood on the stage for the first time, I had one sweaty palm wrapped needlessly around the microphone, cradled in its stand, the other clutching a thin sheet of notebook paper with the dance scrawled on it. It hadn't seemed like a risk when I asked to call, but the moment my feet hit the stage, I was suddenly more terrified than I ever had been in my life.

I am by no means a beginner when it comes to folk dancing. In fact, I have been exposed to folk dancing my whole life, even during my fetal development, thanks to my mother, a folk dance pianist. She plays piano for English country dance, a style immortalized through film adaptations of Jane Austen novels. She also plays piano for contra dancing, which is somewhere between English country and square dancing, French and English traditional dancing kept alive in the hills of New Hampshire. My mother's musicianship was our way of contributing to the tradition. In exchange for her expressive fingers, the English country and contra dance communities raised me.

My heart was racing, my stomach turning somersaults. I tried to suck deep breaths of air into my lungs to calm myself, but that did little to ease my nerves. The music played. I felt the dance in my feet, my legs, my arms, my hands. My body knew the dance, but neither my body nor the scribbles on my paper were capable of explaining it to my mind quickly enough.

Recently, the contra dance scene has been rejuvenated. On a typical Thursday evening, the contra dance at the Scout House in Concord, Massachusetts boasts three lines of coupled dancers, brightly colored skirts flying into circles as the men spin the women around like ballerinas. Two lines consist of dancers of varying ages, from pre-teens too bouncy to dance smoothly to senior citizens too hunched over and creaking to add to the momentum of the dance. The third line is comprised entirely of dancers in their teens and twenties, with only the occasional older couple. In this line, one person can call for a balance, and the whole line will stomp and jump

in a previously learned pattern, dozens of pairs of leather soled shoes making sharp taps on the wooden floor. When the college students are home, and the band is especially good, the third line can have at least twice as many people as either of the other two lines, and the excitement and energy rises to a point where it is almost palpable. There are scads of young musicians, fiddlers especially, eager to learn to play jigs and reels in the contra style. Twenty-somethings throughout the country are starting up dances and learning to instruct, or "call." The contra dance community is healthy and flourishing, and likely will continue to be for years to come.

I could feel the delay in my calling. The experienced dancers on the floor supported me by grasping hands in their groups of four and circling to the left when they were supposed to, in spite of the fact that my croaked "circle left" didn't come until they were already a quarter of the way around. They saved the dance for themselves by progressing down the line, and beginning again with the next couple before I had reminded them. The beginners were less fortunate.

I want to give back to the two distinct, though convergent, communities that raised me; the state of the communities, as well as my own talents and lack thereof, made the decision of how to go about it a seemingly easy one. While the contra dance community is building, the English country dance community is weakening. Many young dancers are drawn away from the stately flow and subtle flirtation of English country, and towards its more rambunctious, blatantly seductive counterpart. Often, I find myself the only person under forty-five at an English dance. There are some new, young English country musicians and callers now, but a year ago their small numbers were fewer, and it was a year ago when I decided that I would learn to call English dancing, and a year ago when I first stood on the stage with my heartbeat pulsating in every limb.

How hard could it be, I wondered. I'm an experienced English dancer, who has a feel for the music, though I lack the skill to reproduce it. While a good contra caller does not necessarily

need to be a good contra dancer, understanding the flow of English country dance is key in calling it. It is my love of the flow, of the graceful intersection of the music and the motion, of the fact that English country dances go specifically with one tune that fits each action perfectly, while contra dances fit with any jig or reel, that makes my preference for English dance slightly greater than my preference for contra dance. I was excited. Calling English country dance should be easy for me; I'm no beginner.

The intermediate dancers floundered as I choked out for a left hand star when it was time for the corners to change. The beginners paused when my call for gates was delayed. I sighed with relief when I noticed that the original top couple was now making their way back up the line. It meant that I could prepare to end the dance. I held up two fingers to the band, signifying that they were to play two rounds more of the tune for two rounds more of the dance. One round, done. I looked at the dancers, and noticed that, as the final round began, there was a couple waiting out at the top. I was supposed to request the proper number of rounds at the proper time so that no couple would have to wait out the final round at the top. But the band finished, and I relaxed my death grip on the microphone, wiped my palms on my skirt.

I accepted my friends' accolades with my bottom lip clenched tight between my teeth. They praised my bravery, and my willingness to try something new, but nothing they said did anything to make me feel better, because they didn't even approach an understanding of how I was feeling. Calling a dance wasn't supposed to be a risk for me, it was supposed to be a way for me to use my talents, English country dancing, to give back to the community that gave so much to me. I hadn't failed my first attempt at something new, I had destroyed my dream of adding to the tradition I loved. I was never going to call again.

But I did. This past summer, I got an opportunity to try again. As I stood by the band, my sweaty palm extended to strangle the microphone, I swallowed hard, trying to push my heart down out of my throat. The first dance I called didn't go much better than the one that preceded it by a year. I couldn't translate the language with which my muscles communicate with music into a language with which people communicate. Not fast enough, anyways. When I

finished, I wanted to cry, but I couldn't. I wanted to do what I always want to do after an embarrassment; I wanted to run away with my tail between my legs and hide until everything magically got better, but I couldn't. I had another dance to call.

I lifted my chin, and folded the dance I had just called into the waistband of my skirt. Why couldn't I ever think to wear clothes with pockets? Calling didn't come easily to me, indeed, I, a person who likes to fade into the background when in large groups, was silly to think that I would be able to stand calmly and competently and do something I had never done before, whatever its connections to things buried deep in my subconscious, in front of a hundred people whose attention was focused on me. But learning to call is important to me, so I held my second dance in one hand, and clutched the microphone in the other.

It went better this time. I wasn't fluent in the language of my muscles, not yet, but I was able to translate faster and more smoothly. When I signaled to the band for the end of the dance, ensuring that there was no couple waiting out at the top during the final round, I let my hand slide off the microphone. The color returned to my knuckles, and I smiled. Not great, but not too bad for a beginner.

The author, a high school senior, lives in Northampton, Massachusetts. The above was written as part of her college application and is used with permission. This article appeared by permission in the CDSS News, issue 206, January/February 2009.