

# Teaching Courtesy

**by Bruce Hamilton**

*In the November/December 2001 issue of the News, we ran a letter by Adam Carlson of Seattle, entitled "How To Dance with Beginners." In a footnote to the letter, Adam cited an essay by English and Scottish country dance leader Bruce Hamilton that influenced his thinking on the subject. A thread on the rec.folk-dancing newsgroup in 1999 led Bruce to write the essay which has been posted on Bill Tomczak's webpage, [www.nrthwnd.com/contradance/hamilton1.html](http://www.nrthwnd.com/contradance/hamilton1.html). It is reprinted here, in a slightly edited form, with the author's kind permission. There are subtleties, exceptions, problems and benefits that this essay doesn't mention, Bruce says, but he's happy to discuss them with anyone else who wants to, and they are part of his callers courses; he can be reached at [bruce\\_hamilton@agilent.com](mailto:bruce_hamilton@agilent.com).*

## **Introduction**

It struck me one evening as I watched my dancers push, scowl at and pester a newcomer, that I was watching well-intentioned people who happened to be unskilled at helping. The thought that followed was, "Well, Bruce, whose job is it to teach those skills?"

Oops.

So I began trying to weave into each evening a bit on how to help effectively. The higher the percentage of experienced dancers, the harder I tried. In the next section, I discuss how I teach the skill to dancers, but I want to head in a few other directions just now.

First, teaching helping skills works. At the last two San Francisco English dances I attended (one as caller, one as dancer), three completely new dancers came in the door. This is a jolt for a dance with only twelve to fifteen couples and for an English dance where there's little repetition and a fair amount of unconnected moving. The new dancers were absorbed seamlessly: they got partners, they moved, they saw happy faces all around them, they saw holes where they were supposed to go, they made mistakes, looked around to see what ought to be happening and fixed those mistakes. The room was quiet so they could hear the caller. It was magnificent. And it happened both times I was there. Most of it is generous-spirited dancers, of course. But where I watched the details, I saw people who've worked with me, doing things I taught.

Second, teaching these skills takes time. I've been making this pitch for at least ten years, probably more (inconsistently since I don't have a regular local dance). I had reports right away from individual dancers that they had this or that good result, but it's only in the last year or so that I've seen a whole room get results.

Third, receiving help is also a skill (and teaching it is, again, the caller's responsibility). Ironically, when I started working on this, I got rapid, dramatic results — beginners are much better at it than experienced dancers (. The bad news is that few (where I've been) dance venues give the caller explicit work-on-skills time with beginners. I myself have only been able to do it in our Scottish class (which is a closed, nine month session) and in Basics classes at weeklong camps.

## **Giving Help**

You want to help, and people look to you for help, but the obvious things to do are distracting and sometimes disruptive. Even if you are only whispering to one person, you send a message that it is not important to listen to the caller. What *can* you do?

1. Keep looking for ways to help. An efficient presentation by the caller assumes the experienced dancers are helping, and helpful experienced dancers are part of a healthy social atmosphere.

2. Don't say anything.

3. Don't touch people except where the dance calls for it.

Cutting out talking and touching seems to cut out everything, but it doesn't. Practice this, and you'll begin to discover a wide variety of ways to communicate. This communication will not only make you a good helper; it will also improve your dancing and teaching.

4. If mistakes happen, let them. If the method you chose didn't work this time, let it go, both physically and mentally. For example, suppose someone is headed for you, about to give left shoulder into a hey that you know begins with right shoulder. You catch their eye, give them a big smile and angle your body slightly for a right shoulder pass. You may also do other things, but suppose none of it works and the time comes when this is going to be either a left shoulder hey or a collision. Shift your body around and make it a left shoulder hey. Just as important, shift your mind around and decide that a left shoulder hey is fine with you: it moves, it takes the right length of time, it leaves you all in the right place (though possibly with wrong momentum), it may produce some nice mirroring with your partner, etc. You can be planning how to get out of it gracefully, and you may be wondering how to make this work better next time, but don't let that interfere with your genuine enjoyment of the figure and the people in it. Teach that mistakes are no big deal by acting as though they are no big deal. There are many repetitions, there are other people helping, there are other dances tonight and there will be other nights.

5. Dance well, enjoy yourself and let it show. Your example teaches both choreography and style, and by dancing well (not stopping to "help," for example), you assure that the vacant spaces appear in the right places at the right times. Your genuine cheerfulness allays the beginner's fear that they are hindering your fun.

### **Receiving Help**

Receiving help is a different skill. I could go on for hours, but callers are supposed to be brief, right? Let me try:

1. When there is a mistake, recognize that you are curious about it: who made it? Was it me? What did I do? What should I have done? What must everyone be thinking of me? Et cetera. Recognize also that none of this is helping and the dance is still going on while you wonder these things.

2. So train your mind to go — not backward to the mistake — but forward to the recovery. Spend one-tenth of a second saying "Darn!" and then focus on this question: if this figure had gone properly, where would it leave me? Go there, and wait for the music to come around for the next figure.

Sometimes the question is easy, e.g., if the figure is one that leaves you where you started. Sometimes it's hard: it's a complex figure, your partner is pursuing a different recovery strategy from yours, etc. In those cases you may need to think two or three figures forward. Sometimes it's best to bag the whole round of the dance: get to progressed places, get opposite our partners and carry on from there.

This is so counter to human nature that it needs a lot of reinforcement. As a caller, my approach is to focus on dancers' recoveries — when a mistake occurs, I shout "Recover!" cheerfully and immediately; I praise good recoveries and grumble at awkward ones; I award verbal bronze, silver or gold stars for smooth recoveries. I don't award stars for anything else: if you want a star, you have to make a mistake. No joke. Sometimes after the dance is over I facilitate a short discussion about what recovery options the dancers had, which ones they chose, etc. I never discuss what the mistake was, who made it or how not to make it, only how to recover (if a mistake is widespread or keeps happening then I review the figure). Notice, by the way, that I think recoveries are the responsibility of the set, and I award stars to the set.

This does a good job of helping people decide that recoveries are important, so they learn to think of figures in terms of "where does this leave me?" It also teaches that mistakes are a normal part of learning a skill. This makes it easier to keep the mind from drifting back to the mistake, it keeps people less uptight and I think it helps, when they become experienced dancers, to treat other people's mistakes lightly.

## Afterword

I wrote that section on Receiving Help, and an hour later realized that it doesn't actually say a word about receiving help.

Rather than fix it so the connection is clearer, I'll leave this anomaly as a sign that callers need to be indirect when teaching recoveries. When dancers are lost, they are typically overloaded, so adding information of any sort hurts more than it helps (that's why I tell helpers to be silent and gentle). We have to do something that doesn't involve shoving information down their throats.

We want to get people's eyes up to the level where help is, and get their focus out far enough that they can see the help. We want to calm their emotions enough that the help can come in, and get them motivated to use whatever comes in. Ideally, following the ideas in Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis*,\* we give the conscious mind some task which keeps it out of the way while calling upon the subconscious to do the real work. Then we trust the subconscious to make use of whatever resources are available, including any help that may be present. (Obviously, we don't want to use help exclusively since it might be unhelpful or absent. Besides, we want to train people to take responsibility for getting themselves out of jams.)

The steps in my checklist try to do those things.

Suppose you find yourself in the middle of a broken figure. The purpose of "Darn!" is to vent the frustration that you typically feel in this situation. Ignoring the past frees your mind of "chatter."

The intent of quieting the emotions and mind is to calm yourself enough for your eyes to come up and their focus to reach out. Asking you to figure out where the figure would leave you is annoyingly difficult and similar to dancing, but it does get your mind moving and taking on a constructive problem (which is the way to get the subconscious working on it). Having you do something (go to the spot) keeps you moving physically. That, in turn, helps others who are trying to recover the figure, keeps your mind moving and gives your subconscious more to work with. To tie this back to where we started: if the mind is quiet, free, functioning and working on the problem of "where do I go," it is receptive to help of all sorts.

I think it is important for the caller not to suggest where to look for cues. There are dozens of likely sources and remembering a long checklist is the last thing we want to ask people to do when they're overloaded.

Even if that were not a problem, any example biases the listener. If I suggest places for you to watch, it immediately becomes hard for you to notice sounds (e.g., the band and the caller's voice). If I suggest audible cues and you listen carefully for those, you are likely to ignore subtle cues from your muscle memory. If I tell you to look at faces, it becomes harder for you to see hands. Et cetera.

And the best cues can't be described. A vacancy in a figure, moving past your peripheral vision, is a powerful stimulus to your subconscious. If you are relaxed, moving and engaged in getting where you belong, your subconscious might put you there even before you noticed it. But to tell you to "watch for the absence of dancers in places where you're not looking" is absurd.

This also applies to teaching dancers to give help; if the caller gives specific suggestions, that narrows the range of things that dancers might think of.

So the connection is that this short list of directions is meant to get the conscious mind unstuck and working on a useful problem. We then hope that the subconscious is free to find help of all sorts, and the conscious is free to use them. The directions for giving help are complementary:

- Cut out the noisy, distracting cues: sound, touch, and distortion of your own dancing.
- Give as many other cues as you can, of whatever sort come to mind.
- Let your body language help keep the stress level down.

This can become a delicious escalation. As the cues get more subtle, dancers get more skilled at

picking up subtle cues, and this in turn leads to ever more subtle cues. Since they're subtle, people don't mind giving them (can't avoid giving the very subtle ones, actually), and since the dancers are finely attuned, they pick them up quickly enough that recoveries become frequent and almost invisible. Finally, as dancers get used to rich, nonverbal communication, the dancing gets very social.

*\* The Inner Game of Tennis, by W. Timothy Gallwey, was published by Random House in 1974; a revised paperback version was issued in 1997.*

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