

# Contra Wabi-Sabi

*by Marcia Michael*

I went to my first contra, alone. For ten minutes, I sat in the car, telling myself to get out and just walk into the dance. Because I had danced on stage in my days of youth, and was comfortable with the medium, I had always avoided social dancing in any form. This was new territory and I had concerns. I didn't want to walk into a cocktail party/meat market ambiance; I just wanted to dance. Also, coming out of a "bad" relationship, men were not exactly on my favorite species list. I didn't want to be "come on" to, or asked out. Neither did I want to sit wallflower-style on the sidelines all evening. I just wanted to dance. I girded my loins (gird: to prepare oneself for action; to attack with sarcasm), I was ready for anything.

I walked into Brentwood (R.I.P.), assuring myself that nothing could stop me from walking right back out again if my considerations proved accurate. I wanted to dance, to move, to free up, yes. But I also needed community. I needed to once again experience men as humans, rather than pustular nematodes. I needed to connect with other women and celebrate through dance, our strength in the feminine. I needed to reclaim my life. I wasn't asking much! From the moment I walked in, I was made welcome. Leda Shapiro was womaning the cash box and was the first contra dancer I met. Recognizing my "deer in headlights" look, she metaphorically took me in hand and lovingly shoved me onto the dance floor. From there, almost the entire community helped me feel a part of, not apart. My mistakes were overlooked (by most). My partners were encouraging (almost always). My female counter partners treated me as friend, not as competition (again, almost always). What a wonderful world! The community pulled me in, and thank you, has never let go.

Coming from the world of ballet, I understand the lure of technical perfection. (Since I work in pain management and structural rehabilitation these days, I see the price many of us have paid to the Goddess Technique, in painful backs, knees, hips, etc.). For years, I was enveloped in dancing to perform, in striving for the "performance perfection." Yet, even as a professional, dance was a personal and intimate expression of self. My dance matrix, my knowledge of what dance is for, and my energetic wellspring, has matured into a self-expression that now puts technique into a healthier perspective, or perhaps transcends technique. How we look dancing doesn't matter, especially not compared to how we feel dancing. What is happening inside of us intensely matters. And how we add to the feelings of those we are dancing with is equally impelling. The often paraphrased "dance as if no one is watching" rings with such clarity. This is one of the greatest aspects of contra. The design allows you to dance with one person after another. The beauty of this is the appreciation for each dancer as being peerless. Beyond following directions and staying on beat, it doesn't matter much if you are the finest dance technician, or if you dance like a flat tire. Each person is unique. As often as not, the most pleasant turn on the dance floor is with someone who is not "the Grande danseur," but the one who has rid themselves of the need for technical excellence, the need to look a certain way, to "look better than" or to be perfect. The person who is unashamedly, unabashedly dancing their authentic self, in them, you see the acceptance shine through; see the joy, the spontaneity. It's a moment of just being in the moment, in time, on the beat, together, in love in a very clear sense of the word.

It's *wabi-sabi*. The centuries-old Japanese art of finding beauty in what is not perfect, the reverence toward authenticity. This can be appreciated for example, in a chipped porcelain teacup, or the tiniest wildflower. *contra wabi-sabi* is the woman who stands wide-eyed on the contra floor for the first time, wondering if the risk is worth it. It's the flat-tire dancer who, no matter how many years go by, will never be a "great" dancer, but is having one heck of a great time with you, and you with them, just dancing. This is a greater, higher and humbler perfection.

The reason I keep coming back to contra? I just want to dance.

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