

What Dancing Taught Me

by Laurel Owen

Most of us hold in our mind's eye the kind of person we want to be. Then we spend time trying to live up to that image. Some want to be more spiritual, or more patient. Some people want to be famous, or richer, or they want to be a fighter for causes, or an ideology. Some would like to avoid confrontations, so they imagine themselves submissive—others envision themselves as leaders, decision makers.

For me, gracefulness was the goal. I grew up in a dancing family. Much of what I learned about human interaction I learned from dancing. You always give a firm grip, and put your weight into the push and pull with your partner. You look people in the eye, and you laugh and smile enjoying the social and physical experience. Life, at its best, is music and dance, a deep rhythm in the multiverse that you share with others. In step. In an ecstasy of movement and patterns. That was my training from a young age. It stuck.

Grace translates into non-dancing situations as firm handshakes, interacting appropriately with eye contact, giving just enough weight (opinions, or points of view) to add balance, and looking for patterns, as in the celebration of earth's seasons. It also means searching for meaningful connections in the physical and emotional planes. A dancer seeks communion, to hear rhythms of speech, not just words and the physical interaction with other people in the pleasant cadences of language. Grace is sensual and intuitive.

Much of what I grew up to emulate, as grace, is disappearing. Balance, in terms of world views and respectfully shared opinions, is out the window. Everyone is yelling at each other and using words like "evil" and "dangerous" to describe opposing points of views. Physical connections have diminished with the internet. As has language. As much as I love my Mac, and my iPhone, they don't convey individual speech patterns in emails or texts. The rhythm has gone, replaced by acronyms and quick bypass words. The emphasis today swings to quick fixes, instant relationships devoid of the dance of courtship, and language cooled down and filtered through electronics. Handwriting, unique as a fingerprint, is no longer taught in schools. Even the actual art of couple and figure dancing has been replaced by modern methods resembling individuals plugged into their own sockets and reacting to varying degrees of electrical charge. It can be fun to dance alone, of course, especially when combined with

house cleaning, from room to room. But it's only with others you learn grace.

The question becomes: How to embody grace in today's world? I'm too old to develop another image for myself. And I'm stubborn—ask my friends.

As I consider this question, I recall one of my favorite dancing partners, Tom. He and I were enjoying a contra one night. Contra dancing is a line of women and a line of men, facing each other, and the dances involve intricate patterns and movement up or down the set, depending on your placement in the line. We had arrived at a large dancehall in Kentucky. Probably 300 people were packed in that hall, and about five separate sets (of two lines per set) extended longways from wall to wall. The live band played a reel. It was loud and thrilling. We had the best musicians from around the country—a full band resonating in a hall with warm bodies, and everyone dancing in time.

At some point, once we learned the pattern of the dance, a fluid, trancelike state befell us as we repeated the geometric figures up and down the room. Suddenly, at that moment, the dance grounded itself into body memory. The shift happened. The sync with other dancers, and with each other, transcended linear thinking. The musicians felt the moment too, and the music flowed effortlessly, exuberantly.

Tom and I were so caught up in the moment that we sailed, middance, over to another set.

The mistake was honest, as the room was packed. For a moment chaos ensued as we realized our mistake and everyone in our new set had to reconfigure to accommodate another couple. But in the end, we laughed, formed to the new set, and kept laughing, and never missed a beat. It was funny. We laugh about it to this day.

So perhaps part of grace is a sense of humor. Disruptions occur every day, much more drastic than our set change that night. But even if I don't compose myself as readily as on a dance floor, maybe I can still maintain an ability to laugh at myself.

Grace may also include looking for and appreciating new patterns even if I have to reach a little further to
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differentiates Roud 533 from 534, as the plot is essentially the same. Lloyd the tinkerer has rationalized the verses and anglicized some of the references: Plymouth Mountain becomes the Misty Mountains, a phrase Lloyd has used before: his translation of “Laszlo Feher” from the Hungarian (made famous by Judy Collins as “Anathea”) starts, “Laszlo Feher stole a stallion, stole him from the Misty Mountains....” But the real kicker is the chorus. The popular Irish song we started with has the line “The devil’s in the women and you never can lie easy,” which is not included in our song. But, I surmise, thinking it too good an idea to omit, Lloyd reintroduced as the chorus, “The devil’s in the women so they say, but how the devil can a fellow let ’em be.”

John Roberts developed his interest in British folksongs in high school, and has been singing them ever since, most notably with longtime partner Tony Barrand and Nowell Sing We Clear. A retired morris dancer, he now gets most of his exercise in English country dance, to which he will soon be returning after a break. John recently sang this song, accompanied by Lisa Preston on harp, in a memorial session for Roy Harris at the Mystic Seaport Sea Music Festival.



(What Dancing Taught Me, cont. from p. 17)
 find them today. In other words, I will not be afraid to change arrangements, paradigms, or motives. The body remembers new dances in time. Change is unchangeable and necessary. Nothing is constant. The dance ends, another begins. Partners may change. The reel changes to a waltz.

The good news is the seasons still change in rhythm. That pulse is my religion. And I can still count on two hands the number of people who are close to me, in whom I trust. Connections don’t need to number in the hundreds, as on a dance floor. Natural seasons and cycles, and the polytheistic rituals I observe, provide abounding sustenance as do my close friends. I take heart in these things.

As for the recent barrage of bad manners, particularly during this presidential election year, from all sides I don’t know what to do with that. I wish people would learn to dance, or write, or otherwise communicate effectively. I suppose there will always be people who want to bang their heads together, or who can’t pull themselves out of the electrical sockets.

Here is what I can do: I will always present with a firm handshake, be attentive to my place in the big picture, as in sets, and laugh at myself when I lose my place for a minute. I can gracefully lend the weight of my convictions with my every step, and love the dance of life.

Maybe if I keep offering that love to people, I can create a new dance, one person at a time.

Laurel’s parents, John and Mary Owen, were Berea College Country Dancers in the 1950s, and went on to teach dancing at Christmas Country Dance School at Berea, KY, and CDSS dance weeks at Pinewoods Camp in MA. Laurel grew up dancing and playing violin and piano, and has recently taken up the viola. She has taught English clog, the Shim Sham, waltzing, and the two-step at various times.

Did you read the Hive Mind column on page 5? Next time we’ll be talking about:

Group Leadership—Welcoming New Voices, Avoiding Burnout

Some groups have decades of history, managed by the same handful of people. Other groups have cultivated new leaders, and work to ensure turnover in key roles. In principle, most of us see the benefits of turnover, but in practice it can be hard to find the right balance between welcoming new leadership and maintaining continuity. How has your group approached the challenge of accommodating new people and ideas, avoiding burnout, and keeping everyone happy? Please share your stories at www.cdss.org/hive before October 1st. We welcome both success stories and cautionary tales—all give helpful perspective.