

## DANCE AND THE FOUR STAGES OF MASTERY

Here perhaps is a more useful way to approach the pleasant discipline we call “learning to dance.” Instead of picturing the classes you take as a linear sequence - say, progressing through four levels of Swing - imagine yourself in an evolutionary process called the learning cycle, four distinct stages through which all human beings progress whenever they learn anything new.

First is Unconscious Incompetence. In this stage you have little experience or skill. In fact, you’re likely quite bad, but because you don’t know how truly bad you are, you don’t feel bad, and your self-esteem isn’t crippled. Yet.

True damage to self-esteem (and the false confidence that coexists with the bliss of ignorance) often occurs in the second stage of learning - Conscious Incompetence. As your awareness evolves into this stage, you begin to realize how little you know. Perhaps you notice how impossible it seems for you and your partners to do much of anything smoothly. You certainly convince yourself that practically everyone at every dance or class is so talented that you’d never think of dancing with them. You may well flee the dance early, and might even avoid such terrifying places of public exhibition for weeks.

In truth, Conscious Incompetence is a vital step in the learning cycle. For once your exaggerated sense of self-loathing finds equilibrium, you have the chance for some valuable self-assessment - you can begin to determine your strengths and weaknesses, and from this sense of where you really are you can begin to focus on strategies for improvement. Much learning occurs here.

As your skills get better and your body works with your mind to integrate new steps and moves into your dancing, you evolve into stage three -- Conscious Competence. This is enjoyable and exciting for most people, because they not only start seeing themselves as good dancers, they realize how much they have learned. Others tell them how enjoyable they are to dance with, now that they’ve reached a certain competence, so a reborn confidence repairs their self-esteem.

Nevertheless, dancers in the Conscious Competence stage spend much of each dance thinking about what move to execute next, and how to balance the effort required to choreograph the next eight bars with the excitement of connecting with their partner. Brains occasionally go on overload, and feet still get trampled, but in general Conscious Competence is an enjoyable stage. Most people spend considerably more time here than in the first two stages. It is also a plateau where many dancers choose to remain.

True mastery isn’t attained until the fourth stage of learning - Unconscious Competence. This is the place where there is little or no difference between what the body has practiced to perfection and the mind has learned. You no longer think about your frame, or what move comes next. In fact, you don’t think much (about the moves, at least). Instead, you’re free to enjoy the moment

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and genuinely connect with your partner. Those who manage to reach this level of mastery are sought after, indeed revered on the dance floor.

The trick is in the getting there. Anyone who manages to take most of the classes offered is pretty much guaranteed to reach stage three -- Conscious Competence. After a year or so of Walter, Julie, or any other instructor, drilling you with new steps and old jokes, you'll dance comfortably with most partners and have a good time.

To achieve mastery, however, you may well have to abandon the linear approach -- give up the convenient notion that simply by progressing through a prescribed sequence of classes you'll end up a great dancer. When we think linearly, we tend to think in terms of quantity instead of quality, or we make alienating comparisons: I want to learn more slick moves; I'll only dance with partners at my level; she's better than I am (or I'm better than him). The trap here is that you risk becoming a dance snob, a stylized technician with the moves of Fred or Ginger, but the heart and soul of Schwarzenegger's Terminator.

When you dance with someone who has achieved mastery, you know it within a few seconds. These partners allow you to look and feel grand, not better than you are, but as good as you can be. You connect. You'll dance with them again and again. Such mastery is an art form, a gift they give to each of their partners. You can choose mastery, just as you can choose to stay at stage three. Both options are valid.

If you opt for mastery, however, part of the prescription is to start seeing each Living Traditions class not as a step in a finite sequence but as a timeless opportunity for learning. So what if you've taken Slow Waltz 2 twice, or Foxtrot 2 three times? Go back and take Slow Waltz 1 again. And again and again. Plunge back into Foxtrot 1, or Swing 2, or try role reversal. What you learn will not necessarily be a published part of the curriculum, but as you guide a less experienced dancer toward new confidence and grace, as you forget about your own footwork and simply enjoy moving with your partner to a new level of competence, your own dancing will transport you to a place of uncommon joy, and you will learn far more than you ever learned the first time through. About dancing, and about yourself.

That's the real magic of any dance class. No matter how many times you take it.

*- by Dean Paton*

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