

TAKING THOSE FIRST STEPS

Taking your first dance class can be a big - and sometimes scary - step in your social life. In that first class, you will find a surprisingly friendly, supportive group of people who are all in the same boat.

As your confidence and your dance vocabulary build, you decide to take the next first steps of entering the larger dance community - maybe going to a Free Recorded Music Dance/Class Party. A few familiar faces, the support of the faculty and staff, good food, interesting conversation with strangers, a few mini-lessons from Walter, and a bunch of fun dances with a variety of people - some of whom you didn't even know - and you're ready to try a Saturday night dance!

So there you are, walking into your first Northwest Dance Network dance, and suddenly this Inner Teenager rises up and swallows the Adult you - and you just know that no one will ask you to dance, that you will make an utter fool of yourself... (There is something about the junior high dance experience that a deeply etched memory in each of us.) So what do you do with this terrified Inner Teen? Pat it on the head, give it a hug if necessary, and sit it on a chair in a dark corner with a hefty Time-out. Climb back into your Adult self, and learn the ropes of the dance.

Coming to the pre-dance workshop is a chance to dance with a dozen or more partners - and gives you familiar faces to look for later. Find the water jugs - this area serves as a great "change partner" circulation area. Smile! Make eye contact. If you come as a couple, dance with others as well. Tap your foot to the music. Avoid sitting too much (especially too near that Inner Teen).

Talk to folks if you aren't dancing. And do your share of the asking (both men and women ask at our dances, and it may be hard at first, especially for women). There is a shorthand you can learn - that a raised eyebrow or an offered hand can be as effective as words. If someone says no, take it circumstantially, not personally. And if you turn one person down for a dance, don't say yes to the next.

In Richard Powers' workshop recently, we were all discussing what makes us feel good at a dance. Here are some of our comments:

- Being asked to dance by a stranger: if everyone asked a couple of strangers to dance, such good feelings could spread widely.
- Eye contact from my partner; looking away to navigate is one thing, but looking to find a candidate for your next dance is another!
- ENERGY! Bring upbeat energy to each dance.

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- Laughing at mistakes; a simple “Oops!” and a laugh lets you move on in the dance, but do say “I’m sorry” if you run into someone.
- Dancing at your partner’s ability level

Watching Frankie Manning (see his DVDs) dance is a lesson in what dance partnering is about. Frankie’s first consideration is to make sure his partner is comfortable. He engages with her and quickly finds her ability level with Swing-and the entire dance is then devoted to making her look good-at her level.

Some thoughts or beliefs can hamper a good dance experience. One is thinking that every dancer out on the floor is better than you are. If you sit down and really watch, you will find every ability level out there. Often those who are having great fun look like they are great dancers, but might be doing just Swing 2 material.

Another concern is the belief that a good dancer doesn’t want to dance with you. Those who enjoy dancing the most are those who understand the fact that dancing is a team effort, that regardless of skill level, a common ground of skill can be found and that dance is really about connection between two people, if only for three minutes.

As Richard put it so succinctly - happiness is what you bring to the dance (and hopefully what you take home), not what the dance brings to you.

Oh - and don’t forget to wake up your Inner Teen and take him/her home - for good. See you out dancing!

The staff at Northwest Dance