

THOUGHTS ABOUT PARTNER DANCING

Here are some of Zachariah's (not Waltz etcetera's) thoughts about partner dance. I'm a fan of real-life partner dancing, dancing that's healthy and vibrant, self-governing and economically self-sufficient. And dancing close with your partner. And no rules: all you need is simple common sense and respect for those around you, forget about special rules & conventions, dance etiquette and all that shinola. Don't go making stuff up.

Dancing is art; art is useless - Most partner dancers probably don't think of their dancing as art, but that's what it is. I don't mean art as in "advanced dancers elevate it to an art," I mean that dancing itself is art; art is what you're doing when you dance, no matter who you are. It doesn't depend on your level of skill. Art has a bad rap these days; people don't trust "artists," but that's just because they don't understand what art is. To understand art, watch kids. Kids do art all the time: making up stories, dancing, drawing pictures, singing, making up plays. Art's as natural to us as breathing, but as we grow up we get disconnected from that playful creative energy, until we come think of art as something that just artists do. That's sad; art's an important part of life. Learning to dance can help you put that playful creative energy back in your life.

Art is useless; don't try to use art. That's the key to understanding art and getting it back in your life. You don't do art because you have to or need to or somebody pays you to do it, you do it because you want to, because it's fun, because you love doing it. The whole tortured artist deal - "I must create, I simply must!" - is baloney; that's part what gives art a bad rap and makes people distrust artists. Tortured art's not art, it's self-administered therapy, and probably not very good therapy at that. Art is something you do out of joy and desire, not need and misery. At a high level, art will take everything you've got and it will stretch you beyond what you think you can endure, but it has to be done out of love, not misery. Doing art has therapeutic effects, but you don't get the effects if you do it to get 'em. You get therapeutic effects because you do it with joy, because you're doing something you love to do.

If you approach dancing as art, it'll make it easier to learn how to dance. Remembering that you're learning to dance because you love to dance eases the inevitable awkwardness of learning something new. You can be frustrated but still light-hearted about it if you remember that. Dance classes give you new skills, new possibilities for having fun and doing something you love to do. Remember the love part; dance because you love to dance. Or go for a hike or something instead. Do something you love.

Loving to dance - If you dance because you love to dance, everything else can fall into place. If you don't love dancing, you're never going to be a dancer. You also need to love the music, but that's a slightly different topic. If your reason for going partner dancing is something other than loving to do it, you don't get to be a dancer, sorry. It's fine to appreciate the benefits of dancing - good exercise, the socialization and mental/physical problem solving help keep your brain working right and all that - but dancing is art, and if you do art for a reason, if you try to use art

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or get something back from it, if you do art for anything other than the pure love of it, it's gonna be bad art. It's not gonna be art at all, just technique and showmanship and decoration; decoration is the enemy of art. Being a dancer has one requirement: loving to dance, loving this thing where you move to music and play with another human in your arms. If you got that, you're a dancer.

As partner dancers, we need a partner, and we rely on our partner to share our love of dancing. Having a shared love of dancing creates a connection between us. All those details of frame and partnering we work so hard to learn are how we work that connection out. The details bring it down to earth and make it functional, but the connection with your partner is what the details are all about. The details are important: knowing the details and making them happen at the right time makes the dancing sing, and float, and feel so sweet, like falling in love - if you're connecting with your partner. The details are only details; if you don't connect with your partner and say to that person "I want to dance with you, let's you & me share our love of dancing" not in words but with your body and mind, the details don't mean anything, they don't go anywhere; you're just a technician at best. "Good technician" is no compliment to a dancer; dancing's all about love.

Dancing with people can open you up to new possibilities. Dancing is different than just hanging out with people or being sociable; creating art together goes a lot deeper than just yakking. But you have to really dance, you have to create art to experience new possibilities. If you go dancing because you think you might get lucky, or you just want to shuffle amiably along and chat with your partner, or to get a workout, or to show off, or for anything other than purely loving to dance, no new possibilities. If you want dance to open you up, you have to engage your partner, connect, try new stuff, push your limits, get outta your comfort zone. You have to play hard. Nothing interesting's ever gonna happen if you stay in your comfort zone. You have to push your limits physically, emotionally, creatively, playfully. Then dance can start to open you up to new possibilities.

Leading and following - In some dance circles it's become fashionable to edge away from the idea that partner dance consists of leading and following, and to try and come up with more politically correct terms and concepts. PC revisionism; kinda silly. But there is a problem that these linguistic revisions are an attempt to address: many dance teachers make no effort to teach what leading and following really are, or at least really should be. Maybe it's because the teachers don't know themselves, and are only passing on the incomplete picture of things they were taught.

Partner dance is the interaction of a lead and a follow; the roles are clear and unambiguous. Sure, it's possible to switch roles, and you can switch roles very quickly and subtly. You can also dance little solos, flourishes and embellishments, and if done correctly they won't detract from the dance itself. But in all these cases, there's still one lead and one follow. That's it, that's partner dance: one lead, one follow. If you can't hack it, try something else.

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Leading isn't pushing or pulling your partner; it's communicating an intention. It's not easy to learn how to communicate an intention vs. merely shoving your partner around, but that's what learning to lead consists of. Learning to follow, to grasp the lead's intention and respond to it, is no easier; both roles are equally demanding, and are in fact very subtle, sophisticated activities. Beginners can't lead or follow at first; at first beginners simply learn steps and then learn how to execute them in tandem with a partner. Some dancers stay at this level, and they may become very polished and sophisticated with their choreographed routines. But you can always tell the difference between a polished routine - choreography - and real leading and following: choreography looks like two dancers executing steps together, rather than a couple dancing.

Imitation and choreography are valid preliminary stages for beginners to go through. But beginners deserve to be pointed in the right direction; they deserve to be learning how to lead or follow from the very start. Leads should never be taught that it's OK to shove your partner around, however gently. Real leading and following do not include any shoving around of any sort or degree; it's not a matter of shoving more gently, it's a matter of inviting and responding.

Leading and following are forms of engagement with your dance partner. Leading is active engagement; following is responsive engagement. A lead invites a follow, for instance, to take a step of a certain size and speed in a certain direction, with a certain quality of movement. The follow can accept the invitation or not; the dance can go on either way. But if the lead is truly engaged with the follow and with the music, the invitation will almost never be declined, because it will be what both partners want: you want to move together to the music, that's why you do partner dance. That's what feels so fabulous.

The lead is communicated not by pushing, pulling or shoving but by contact, both physical contact and in most cases visual contact. The goal in creating and tending your contact with your partner is to keep it absolutely even: the pressure of physical contact never varies. The contact between us - our frame - simply stabilizes our spatial relationship with each other. I move, and my partner moves with me. I do not have to push her or pull her; she wants to move with me, and as long as I'm not moving stupidly or absently or wrongly for the music, she will move with me. I lead my partner by inviting her to move with me in a way that suits the music and is easy and natural for her. It's my business as a lead to know how much weight she has on each foot, and what kind of step will be easy and natural for her, and will fit the music.

Leading and following on this level is not easy to learn, but it's what partner dance is, and it should be taught to all dance students from the beginning.

You gotta love the music - You can't love to dance if you don't love the music. Music is what you dance in; you dance with a partner, but in the music: it's the environment, the setting, and it provides the beginning, middle and end for your dance. Unless you're the DJ, like me, you may not have a lot of choice about what song's on next, and I admit it: that's part of what I love about being the DJ. But I dance a lot of places, to a lot of different kinds of music, and I find ways to

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love it all, or at least most of it. On the rare occasion when I don't love the music, the evening isn't so much fun. It's really important to love the music.

I don't mean passively loving the music, as in This is my favorite band or favorite waltz or whatever - that's music you've already decided you love, it's an established fact for you (watch out: as you become a dancer that might get all shaken up). I mean actively loving the music that's playing right now, as you dance. You're not going to be able to get into the music and make it the environment your dance travels through unless you love it. You have to resonate with it, let it hook you with its hooks, move you with its beat. If you're looking down your nose at the music or shrinking from it or thinking it's stupid or boring, it's just not gonna work for you. Find a way in, a way to love the music that's playing right now, or sit this one out or go to another dance. Don't torture yourself and your partners by "dancing" to music you can't find it in you to love.

Choreography vs. dancing - Learning choreography is a useful early stage in learning partner dance, but you don't really start dancing until you leave choreography behind. Typically, you start out learning anything new in dance by learning choreography: steps, patterns, moves. The accepted way (not the only way) to learn new dance is to memorize steps and patterns and movements and practice them until they become something you've got, something you don't have to think about. But memorizing a step and adding it to your repertoire is the superficial part of the learning that's going on if you're a partner dancer. As a partner dancer, what you're really learning is how to communicate with your partner better, how to lead better, how to follow better, how to do a better job of making dance happen between two people. Doing a step or routine you've memorized isn't really dancing, no matter how flawlessly you execute it.

The moves, steps and routines you learn are useful; they become part of your vocabulary as a dancer. But as you get better, they gradually lose their hard edges: "I'm leading a swingout." "I'm following a fast turning waltz." Instead, the sensations, muscle memory and body dynamics of the moves and patterns become part of you, and in the process they become infinitely variable. The better you get, the less it's about defined moves and patterns and the more it's just play, experimentation, moving with a partner: dancing. When someone asks me Hey what dance was that you guys were just doing, I usually can't say; it wasn't any dance in particular. I was just dancing with my partner, playing and improvising to the music.

The problem with all that is it's a big, long, steep learning curve between "triple-step, triple-step, rock-step" and pure improvised play with your partner. A lot of people end up stepping out of the learning process before they get there; dancing's not for everyone. Dance organizers and promoters cater to people unwilling or unable to make their way to dance as improvisational play by offering scripted alternatives: contra dances, line dances, squares, quadrilles, grand marches, mixers, etc. etc. That's all fine, but there's a missing element: the pure creative expression that shimmers, slinks, bubbles, or explodes out of the volatile combination of you, your partner, and the music when there's no script in sight. That's dancing.

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The dance police - The dance police are everyone who thinks they know the right way to dance but aren't willing to keep their gems of knowledge to themselves. "The right way" has nothing to do with good dancing or skill; it's simply what the dance police think is proper or correct. But how you dance is up to you and your partner; it's nobody else's business. Yes, you need common sense and respect: observe the rules of the road, be courteous to other dancers, avoid causing collisions and creating obstructions; the dance floor is a shared public space governed by simple common-sense conventions that make it easier to share. But nothing else about your dance is anyone else's business; the rest is between you and your partner.

Everyone has opinions, but the dance police are afflicted with the idea that their opinions matter. Opinions don't matter. Knowledge, skill, insight and things like that may matter, but opinions don't. We have a lot to offer each other as fellow dancers and partners, but "the right way to dance" isn't one of them. Work out the right way to dance with each partner, and let everyone else do the same.

The dance police see themselves as chaperons at a high school dance. But we're all grown up now and who you dance with, who you don't dance with, how much you dance with one person, how close you dance, what steps and rhythms you use are nobody else's damn business. Go ahead and dance your "improper" dance right in front of the dance police. This is a rare exception where showing off may have some redeeming social value; maybe it'll make the dance police so disgusted they'll go away and police some other dance. The rest of us would be most grateful; nobody likes the dance police.

Ignore the dance police; they're quite impotent, just a bunch of busybodies afflicted with painful opinions. Take particular care you don't become one of them.

"Family-friendly" dances don't work - Some dance promoters and organizations have latched onto the family-friendly idea, targeting young families to expand their business horizons a bit. Bring the kids! Everybody come dance together! All ages! I've been to some of these family-friendly dances, and they just don't work; they're miserable, dangerous places for kids to be. Partner dance is an adult environment; it's inherently kid-unfriendly. Dancers come to a dance to dance, not to watch kids frolic; dancers shouldn't have to worry about running over a kid on the dance floor. Dance floors are dangerous places for kids, and kids are a danger to dancers.

As a parent, you have a choice: go to a dance to dance, or go to a dance to be with your kid. Don't abandon your kid at a dance; stay together. Dance together. If you bring your kid, hang out with your kid and make sure your kid's having a good time too. That way he or she won't be in danger of being stepped on or knocked down by fast-moving dancers. And that way everybody can have a good time, your child included. But you can't really participate in partner dancing when you have your child with you; it's not fair to your child or to the other dancers.

Dance as close as you want - There's a puritanical streak in partner dance: dance students are often taught you should always hold your partner at arm's length no matter what. Don't listen to

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the puritans; they didn't have it right about the witches, and they don't have it right about dancing close. How close you dance with your partner is a subtle, gentle, ongoing negotiation with each partner, in each dance. There is no right or wrong, just what both people want. Me, I like to dance close. There is one rule: whoever wants the most distance rules. Trying to force a partner closer, whether by muscling them in (leads) or refusing to have any frame and collapsing into your partner (follows) is rude, and can even be grounds for walking away in the middle of a dance. Try to work it out verbally if nonverbal clues don't work, and only walk away as a last resort. But walk away if that's what it takes; do not tolerate unwanted closeness.

Puritanical dance teachers have dominated how some dances get taught, at least in this country. In every turning waltz class I ever took, the teachers emphasized the importance of maintaining open space within the frame at the top. "Imagine there's a beach ball between your chest and your partner's." That's a lot of space! I'm sorry to say I never questioned that, and taught the same to many dance students over the years. But friends of mine who have spun to Strauss in Vienna and musettes in Paris tell me that a very close embrace is common, even for very fast turning: you can spin in contact with your partner, chest-to-chest and thigh-to-thigh. Shocking! Scandalous! The dance police do not approve! I now teach turning waltz as a dance that can be done in open or close embrace; for faster waltzes, a close embrace makes waltzing much easier, more connected, more relaxed. For blues, a closer embrace is natural and intuitive.

In all the partner dances I know, there's quite a lot of room for individual preference regarding how close you dance. You should check it out; experiment with dancing close with a partner who's comfortable dancing close with you. You might find you like dancing close.

Bad habits - Most dancers develop bad habits as they learn to dance. Some of these may be strategies - good or bad - that you adopt as part of your struggle to learn to dance, that then stay around to plague you long afterward. A classic example is counting the beat of the music: out loud, under your breath, silently, even just mentally. If you're counting the beat of the music, in any way on any level, it's a barrier to dancing; you're counting instead of hearing the music. Dance teachers count out the beat to help students learn to hear it in the music. The point is to learn to hear it, not to imitate the dance teacher. Stop counting. No, really, right now. It's really irritating. Stop it!

Bad habits of posture are particularly disruptive to good dancing, and hard to detect in yourself. There are way too many to list; any physical habit that makes it harder for you to be upright, open to your partner, relaxed, present, in contact is a bad habit of posture. The only cure for these habits is to dance with good partners and hope they'll help you out. Seeing yourself dance on video may give you a clue that you have a bad habit, but to break one of these you're still going to need a partner or partners who will patiently help you with it. Or impatiently; the point is to find partners who won't simply put up with your bad habits. Good luck.

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Obnoxious styling - Styling can add snap and humor to your dance connection, or it can be an obnoxious, self-absorbed solo act that detracts from the connection. Dancers who are entranced with styling - shines and footwork variations, hand styling, head styling, etcetera - easily end up leaving their partners out of the loop. Leads and follows can be equally guilty of this. Styling should never get in the way of the dance itself. Your connection, moving with your partner to the music, is what dance is; styling should be unobtrusive. Stick with the dance, stick with your partner; let styling be an organic outgrowth of that connection.

Never dance with anyone you don't want to dance with - For partner dance to work, you have to say to your partner "I want to dance with you" and you have to mean it. Not in words, but in your body, in your dancing. Dancing with someone you don't want to dance with out of obligation, or in obedience to a social rule, at any time when it can be avoided is poisonous to you and to your partner because it's a lie. Lies are always poisonous. When you dance with someone you hold them in your arms and you move together in an intimate embrace. If you dance with someone you don't want to dance with, you're telling a lie not merely with your mealy mouth that said yes when you meant no, but with your body and movement and breath; you're telling a serious lie.

Wanting to dance with someone can be anything from nice but relatively shallow ("That person looks lonely; I'd like to make them feel more welcome here") to truly profound ("I want to dance with you more than anything else I can even imagine right now"). It's not important why or how much you want to dance with someone, but it's absolutely critical that you do want to dance with that person. If you don't want to but you do, you're betraying them and betraying yourself. Don't do it.

PS: this only applies in situations where you're free to choose your partner. It does not apply in dance classes, for instance; there your obligation is to dance with the next person in rotation, graciously and generously.

- by Zachariah Cassady