

Salsa Connection

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Sam Gill

Introduction:

Through the summer and fall of 2008, Sam posted a series of essays, posted as blogs on <http://blog.Salsa-Challenge.com>, describing and discussing elements of the art of partner dancing. The discussion is framed in his experience teaching and dancing salsa, a popular Latin American dance form, yet the topics are relevant to all partnering, both on and off the dance floor. Sam brings his experience and knowledge from his academic studies to enrich this discussion. He plans to occasionally add essays on this theme.

Part I: Introduction to Salsa Connection Blog Series (posted 6/16/08)

I clearly remember the exact moment when it finally dawned on me, although I'd known it for a long time. It was last December. Elise Butler, my former salsa student and frequent dance partner, was home for the winter holidays from New York University, where she is a student. During the holiday we had only an hour or so to meet, catch up, and dance a little. We chatted a bit over coffee and then turned on the music to dance salsa. As we danced the familiar joy and ease of dancing together quickly returned. I never fail to be amazed at how great it is to really dance with another person and dancing with Elise is really fun. The moment came when in the middle of leading Elise in a simple right turn I was suddenly inspired to change it into a left turn. I was astounded that Elise followed this without a hitch or jerk. She smiled to show her pleasure at executing this surprise lead. We were truly connected in our dancing; we had what I call the **salsa connection**.

I couldn't get this moment off my mind all winter and increasingly began to appreciate and articulate what I already knew: the joyous fun smooth effortless salsa dancing simply cannot be done without having the skill to create with your partner the **salsa connection**. This is as true for girls as for guys, for follows as well as leads. I see it also as fundamental to social dancing and, I'll be bold here, it is also a metaphor for all relationships.

Appreciating the importance of the **salsa connection** has changed the way I teach salsa dancing. I see it as the most important thing I have discovered about salsa dancing, the inspiration for a major development in my teaching, and amazingly it now begins to resonate with almost everything in my life. As Elise and I have developed our teaching of salsa in our summer offering called, not surprisingly, **Salsa Connection**, I am finding that the students in my classes and my private students are all greatly appreciating the concept and more so experiencing the results. All find it important to their dancing and to their lives.

I am going to continue this discussion of the **salsa connection** through a series of blogs, so check back for future blogs and let me know what you think. Some of the things I'll be writing about are:

- ❖ What is the **salsa connection** and why don't we get it?
- ❖ Touch and the **salsa connection**
- ❖ Negotiating the **salsa connection**
- ❖ Eye contact and the **salsa connection**
- ❖ Music and the **salsa connection**
- ❖ Teaching equally to follows and leads via the **salsa connection**
- ❖ **Salsa connection** from a relationship perspective—for men
- ❖ **Salsa connection** from a relationship perspective—for women
- ❖ Flow and the **salsa connection**
- ❖ Existential Phenomenology and the **salsa connection** (Yikes!)
- ❖ Thumbs Up!

Part II: What is the Salsa Connection and why don't we get it?

So what is this **salsa connection** and how do we get it? You'll remember that exercise done in most first salsa classes right after the basic foot patterns have been introduced. You know, that little exercise where the lead and follow lean against one another's hands and then pull away from one another. Perhaps the teacher talks briefly of tone in the arms or the connection at the hands. But then the class goes on ... everyone wants to get to the moves. And the succeeding classes continue one after another focusing on moves and individual skills.

Since in classes the extensive repetition of a new move leads to the appearance of mastery, we do not adequately comprehend that this apparent competence is not due to actually learning how to lead or follow, not due to strong partnering skills. The only continuing mention of anything related to the **salsa connection** are comments usually directed to the follow by often frustrated leads about them having arms that are "too loose" or "too stiff." Many follows I have talked to about this have little clue about what this means or why it is important. Some come to me and ask "Are my arms too stiff (or too loose)?" I have come to appreciate that dancers simply do not understand the **salsa connection**.

Salsa connection is the foundational relationship between dance partners that allows them to communicate amazing amounts of information almost instantly so that they dance together smoothly and seemingly effortlessly. This connection is extremely complicated and I'll develop the notion in much more detail in succeeding essays.

But why don't we get it? We don't get it because we (teachers and dancers) don't understand how foundational the **salsa connection** is and I don't think that many teachers know much about how to teach it. This may be because for many teachers, as great dancers, it may come rather naturally to them and they don't realize how foreign the **salsa connection** is to many who are learning to dance.

I believe that the main reason most dancers aren't aware of the fundamental importance of the **salsa connection** is the way salsa moves are taught. I believe that what happens is that follows learn the patterning of the move and rely on an initiating signal that a move is called for. Then the follows simply, and often skillfully, take themselves through the move without actually being led. They are just holding the leads' hands. What results is the appearance that women are following and men are leading, but the truth comes out on the dance floor. Outside of the controlled classroom where follows know what move is being practiced, many dancers experience the awkwardness of attempting to dance a move. There are those jarring and confusing moments when a move fails. There are those painful situations where women feel they are dragged (the word "horsed" always comes to my mind) through a move. Or there is the appearance of jerkiness and separateness between partners who somehow get through the dance but don't seem to be dancing with one another. I believe that all this is because dancers are not taught the skills of the **salsa connection**. I have worked hard to be able to teach the skills of the **salsa connection**.

Part III: Touch and the Salsa Connection

Diane Ackerman declared that "touch seems to be as essential as sunlight." Saul Schanberg wrote, "We forget that touch is not only basic to our species, but the key to it." Remarkably the word "touch" is the longest single entry in the unabridged dictionaries of many languages. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* the entry runs 14 full columns. Constance Classen wrote "touch is a fundamental human medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies."

We live in a society and at a time when touch is highly restricted. Touch often suggests abuse and is restricted sadly, but for understandable reasons, in schools and work places. However, touch is essential to social dancing. While there are occasions when inappropriate touch takes place on the dance floor, most dancers understand that touch is essential to dancing and that the conventions of dancing tend to restrict touch to certain types and body areas.

Okay, what does touch have to do with this **salsa connection**? First, let me say that I find it amazing how much information two people can communicate to one another through even the briefest and lightest touch. Touching in salsa should usually be light. I describe it this way. If we want to appreciate the feel of some fine fabric, silk or velvet say, we don't grab a big wad of it in our fist and squeeze it tightly. Rather we use the tip of our finger and touch it very lightly. The **salsa connection** is like this. We gently connect with our partner and concentrate on the amazing subtlety of the connection. But not all touching is the same. I think many partners touch more in the sense of just hanging on to one another. Many leads (guys) tend to hang on like they fear losing their partner. They press their thumbs into the backs of the follows' fingers grasping with all their might. And follows (women) often do this as well; that death grip. This sort of touching is like grabbing a fist full of silk; one can never feel the beauty of the texture. Touch can also be simply incidental. This is where one or the other dancers goes through her or his moves while holding on (rather incidentally it would seem) to a partner.

But touching can be sensitive and interactive. This occurs when both dancers are constantly attending to one another, connecting with one another, constantly adjusting to be fully sensitive and connected to

one another through this light, but clear and active, act of touching. This is fundamental to establishing the **salsa connection**. This sort of touching also requires the re-evaluation of our concepts of lead and follow. I think most believe that the lead pushes, drags, and otherwise forces the follow around to do what he wants her to do. We have grown accustomed to presenting this idea in feminist and gender-sensitive terms by saying that the lead is showing off the follow or presenting her as beautiful. A recent metaphor I heard was that the man is the frame, the woman is the picture. But I think it is time to take the equality of the roles completely seriously and to show how both roles are equal, although a bit different, in importance, presence, and action.

Touch is one of the most essential aspects of the **salsa connection** and the right touch requires loads of practice and attentiveness to create the embodied skills to constantly experience the **salsa connection**.

Part IV: Negotiating the Salsa Connection

The **salsa connection** begins when the follow senses that a “lead” is about to occur. A lead is the expression through the hands, body, etc. of an intention to execute an action in movement. Even most poorly executed leads, unconsciously, begin with some subtle shift in muscle tension or movement flow. A well executed lead will very clearly make this prelude to the initiating action. Often it involves slightly raising one’s hand or hands, stopping the flow of one’s hands or body, shifting one’s weight, tensing the arm or hand muscles. Follows are amazingly able to detect this prelude to the actual lead. This attentiveness/awareness is an essential follow skill. At this moment both lead and follow recognize (automatically in their bodies when the skill is developed) that communication regarding a change is about to occur. At this moment the dancers have the opportunity to do what I call “negotiate a connection.” In a mere nanosecond, the partners match muscle tension in preparation for the action to follow. This requires equal attention, action, and initiative by both partners. Each is equally giving to and taking from one another. Each is assessing and matching the presence of the other. They become actively and energetically connected, equal, together, one in that moment and ready for the movement that is to follow. When this occurs they have established the **salsa connection**. All of this takes place in a fraction of a second, yet almost every dancer I have worked with quickly recognizes when the **salsa connection** has been established and when it is missing. Once aware, dancers immediately recognize how essential the **salsa connection** is to partnering and to enjoyable smooth connected social dancing. Many dancers are now shifting their priorities from learning yet another move (likely poorly executed) to developing their skills of creating the **salsa connection** realizing that the results are so satisfying.

So how do we get or develop the skill to have the **salsa connection**? I have begun to change all my teaching to center on the development of these **salsa connection** skills. I have developed a range of “skill drills” that prevent follows from anticipating a move or action. These “skill drills” then require intense focus on the establishment of the **salsa connection** for both lead and follow to be able to properly execute the move. Failures in these skill drills show the obvious absence of the **salsa connection** and motivate the persistence in gaining the skills. Of course, success is accompanied by the elated feeling of the **salsa connection**. I now also teach all moves in terms of the **salsa connection**. I am now finally able to give equal attention to follows as to leads. The skill is fully bodied and eventually

becomes unconscious. It actually must become so in order to lead and follow dance elements in time with the music. But this skill is subtle and difficult and requires a great deal of practice. I am convinced that most failed moves, most awkward looking dancing, stems from the dancers' failure to understand the importance of and to develop the skills to create a **salsa connection**.

Part V: Eye contact and the salsa connection

I lived with Navajos many years ago when I was doing research for my PhD. They have some interesting social behaviors. They point with their lips rather than a finger or hand and they avoid direct eye contact. I found myself often trying to respond to someone who was looking in my general direction, but was actually talking with someone away from me. Cultures practice different conventions on many social behaviors including eye decorum. We tend to judge whether someone is telling the truth by whether or not they make eye contact. We even implore children to look us in the eye when we want the truth from them.

Eye decorum in social dancing is often a tricky and difficult social skill to master and I believe it is an important part of that cluster of skills through which we create the **salsa connection**. So often we observe salsa dance eye decorum where the partnering dancers never look at one another, especially eye to eye. When we dance with someone that never makes eye contact with us, we often feel that likely they didn't even care who they are dancing with. We likely feel ignored. This isn't always intended; indeed, likely rarely. However, many of us have developed this type of eye decorum because we are concentrating on the dance, or perhaps because we are shy or even embarrassed. We may be embarrassed that we are so close to and even touching someone we don't know and feel a little uncomfortable.

Then many also experience a partner who stares at us, never breaking eye contact. Some women find that men tend to stare at certain body parts making them uncomfortable.

Eye decorum can be confusing, complicated, and many find it almost impossible to control their own eye decorum. Given all this, eye contact is important in creating the **salsa connection**. Here are my suggestions. Make eye contact with your partner and allow yourself to communicate with your partner through your eyes. So what do you communicate? Well, for starters that you know they are there and that you are dancing with them; that you are enjoying dancing with them; that you want to be connected with them. As physical touch is light and not grasping, so too should be eye contact. Don't stare or focus on one part of your partner's body no matter what that is. Keep your head up and your eyes up so that as you move your body your eyes will come into contact with your partner's eyes. Let your eyes smile and enjoy the connection with your partner.

I often do an exercise in classes where the women are asked to follow the three basic salsa patterns without the man holding her hands. I ask her to concentrate on what I call (with a touch of humor, of course) "the salsa aura." This I tell them in the space that surrounds the lead's body particularly the shoulders and head. By carefully watching the lead as he moves, most women have little difficulty (if the man is sure of what he is going to do) creating their **salsa connection** with him and seamlessly

following him. This is further evidence of the importance of eye contact in creating the **salsa connection**.

Part VI: Music and the salsa connection

It is not surprising, however also unfortunate, that many learning to dance salsa hardly hear the music. There are so many things to think about and to do that music is often relegated to ambience. Furthermore, for many dancers who grew up on North American top-forty music, where the beat is usually uncomplicated and so dominating as to be unavoidable, layered Latin American rhythms may sound confusing, even baffling. Finding the beat may be difficult. This is for me also one of the most confounding aspects of teaching salsa. If a dancer doesn't hear the beat or feel the rhythm, it is difficult to teach it.

Music is the principal external factor that serves to connect the partners in dancing. The rhythm or beat provides the pace and establishes the basis for the temporal coordination of partners. The musicality of the music creates the shifts and moods and breaks for the dancers to jointly express themselves by dancing in a way that complements the music. Dancers create another layer of rhythm, thus becoming musicians as well as dancers, through the conventional salsa basic rhythm step pattern of 1, 2, 3, pause, 5, 6, 7, pause. Where in the music they dance—that is “on 1,” “on 2,” or anywhere else in the 8-count—shapes the feeling and character of their experience relative to the music. Dancers' interconnection to the music also occurs where their movement is in relationship to the breaks and shifts in the music and where dancers interpret the mood and feeling of the music in their dancing style. The **salsa connection** here extends to include the character, feel, and rhythmic distinctness of each piece of music. Dancers connect with one another by dancing to the music, yet, even more importantly, through their joined interpretation of and contribution to the music.

In salsa dancing, as I understand it, the lead follows the beat in the music. The lead allows his steps to be pulled into the floor by the beat, no matter what count he is dancing on. The follow allows her connection with the lead to pull her step into the floor and this simply cannot happen if the couple isn't maintaining a clear **salsa connection**. The lead follows the music and the follow, in a very complex relationship, follows the lead into the music. Follows cannot step ahead of the lead's step no matter how he is hearing and interpreting the music. Still, if the lead doesn't hear the music, doesn't find a beat to dance on, if he can't stay on the same count in the rhythm, it is nearly impossible to have a connection between partners. The jarring disconnect with the music will be amplified in the difficulty of maintaining the **salsa connection**.

Part VII: Women Get Equal Attention ... Finally!

If we understand that the **salsa connection** is foundational to salsa dancing and if we understand that the **salsa connection** requires as much from follows as leads, then we need to teach as much to follows as to leads; women as to men. I've always aspired to give equal attention to the women as to the men (to follows as to leads) when teaching salsa. I have always seen the dance ideally as a totally equal

connection between leads and follows, women and men. In teaching and dancing with SalsAmigos (www.SalsAmigos.org) and Salseritas (www.Salsa-Challenge.com), where all dancers learn equally to both lead and follow, and in following lots while teaching, I follow about as much as I lead and I know from experience that, while the roles are different, they are equally demanding. Still, until my recent attention to teaching everything in terms of the **salsa connection**, I found it difficult to give as much attention to follows as to leads. Developing methods of teaching salsa dancing based on the equal roles of leads and follows to create a **salsa connection** is the most important single area of growth in my many years teaching salsa dancing.

For years I progressively refined my understanding of salsa technique and have taught that to students, but it didn't include nearly enough attention to what I am now calling the **salsa connection**. I have always really wanted to focus equally on leads and follows, but inevitably I found myself spending far more time and effort on the leads. What I have slowly discovered over the years is that this approach to teaching doesn't create solid partnering skills. Here is how I see it. In the class setting, we tend to focus on moves. It is amazing how strongly students in salsa classes demand more and more moves. We believe, mistakenly I think, that great dancers are the ones with the most moves. We certainly are conditioned to think this way in our culture where those most admired have the most toys. In teaching moves most follows quickly, yet largely unconsciously, learn subtle clues that tell them what move the lead is hoping to do. Then follows simply do this move pretty much on their own when they pick up the clue. In moves classes, new moves are practiced over and over again. While it appears that leading and following these moves are actually being mastered, most dancers experience that when they go out dancing they can neither lead or follow the moves they learned in class. So what is the problem? Neither dancer has learned the basic skills of partnering, how to establish the **salsa connection**. Most do not even know what is missing. I am now making sure that this no longer happens in my classes. Women, you will get equal attention.

Part VIII: Salsa connection from a relationship perspective—for men

I believe that couples cannot dance in that amazing connected flowing smooth feeling sense without the **salsa connection**. It is never just the moves that create this experience, it is the connection. And, when you think about this, no great relationship can occur without something like this connection.

All social dances are associated with relationship since they all require two people. People in established relationships go out dancing for many reasons, but certainly it is a great way to enjoy and celebrate one's partner relationship.

The salsa dance venues around here seem to host a pretty active singles scene. Lots of singles go out dancing to meet other singles and, presumably, prospective partners. Many people take salsa dance lessons to prepare themselves for this scene, hopeful of the outcome. There are positive and negative aspects to salsa dancing being the means towards relationship ends. At the risk of sounding a bit like an advice column, which is exactly what I am doing, I want to talk to the men.

Guys, I know that for many of you even to attempt to dance is putting yourself way outside your comfort zone. You are to be congratulated on having the courage to try dancing. You deserve to have good results by having fun and connecting with your dance partners as fully as possible no matter what happens off the dance floor. Just be careful not to be discouraged by the pressure of being in this situation.

Here's a little secret. I've talked with dozens of women about who they like to dance with and what sort of dancing they most enjoy. Every single one of them says something like: "Oh I like to dance with So-in-So so much. He really only knows about 4 moves, but he is so nice, he pays attention to me, he is gentle, and he has so much fun." I've never had a woman tell me "I love to dance with that Other-So-in-So because he whips me around and drags me through his moves; besides he barely pays attention to me." Another secret: in many Latin American cultures most social dancers do little more than the basic moves, but wow is it beautiful and sensuous. They dance a little, then sit down and drink and chat with their friends, then dance a little more.

The lessons, guys, here are pretty simple and actually almost obvious. Be a gentleman. Be courteous to the women you asks to dance. Dance to their skill level (and your own) and save showing off the moves you have yet to master for your closet door mirror or a class setting. Don't lead a move you aren't pretty sure you can lead successfully with the lady you are dancing with. Never ever criticize your partner. Always smile at her. Never ever instruct your partner on the dance floor. Never ever give your partner that knowing look that she just screwed up royally and yet you are kindly not going to call her on it. Never every prepare a lead with that look that tells her that you are about to do something really cool and she better be ready to make it happen so you'll look as cool as surely she thinks you are.

And do your best to create a **salsa connection** with your partner. You may think that since this is both of you being equally active in the formation of the **salsa connection**, you can't achieve it unless you are dancing with someone who knows about it. This isn't true. If you dance with as much attentiveness as possible to your partner, she will have the greatest opportunity to connect with you. Give her every chance and you'll be happily surprised far more often than you will be disappointed. Besides, if you do your best to connect with your partner and she doesn't even notice or attempt to reciprocate, than you've likely learned something pretty important about her.

Here are more things you can do. Be confident. If you are just learning to dance, this is sometimes difficult. However, women do not want to hear you constantly apologize for how terrible you are. You are at the level you are and just do the best you can and you'll be fine. Confidence is shown not by the moves you attempt, but by your posture and attitude. Keep your shoulders back and down, head up, and make appropriate eye contact, light hand connection, care to protect your partner from crunching into others, escort her to and from the dance floor and thank her for dancing with you, and show how much fun you are having. If you can pull off even a few of these things you'll be showing that you are interested in **connection** and women will enjoy dancing with you.

Part IX: For Women: Relationship Clues in the Salsa Connection

Women, presumably you have read what I wrote for the guys and you should expect from your partners the things I have indicated. If you don't get it, then don't repeatedly put yourself in the situation. Don't dance with guys who are rude, who don't pay attention to you, or who put you at risk.

I teach dance to many couples who are preparing for their first dance together as a married couple at their wedding reception. I enjoy doing this and I can usually tell within a few minutes what I think are the chances for these couples to make it. I keep my views to myself, of course. Dancing often edges people outside their comfort zones. Guys often feel loads of pressure just attempting to dance. They have to initiate lots of the action including asking women to dance (although I'm certainly of the school that holds it is fine for women to ask men to dance), they have to lead, they have to feel responsible for their partner's experience, and to do so while often feeling like they can't remember a thing they have learned or how to do the few things they happily remember. Feeling the pressure, guys may overreact by clutching your hand too tightly, by failing to ever make eye contact, by apologizing constantly, and by crunching their bodies into a little humped-over balls. None of these things is necessarily pleasant, but it doesn't mean they are bad guys. Talk politely to them and complement them when you can. Don't instruct them or belittle them because we have all been there at one time or another. If you really don't enjoy dancing with them and don't care to when they ask, refuse politely. You may say simply, "No thank you."

However women, don't take rude and inappropriate touching and other behavior from any guy. Tell him straight out that it isn't okay with you and do not dance with him again. He will stop the inappropriate behavior only when he can't get anyone to dance with him.

Women, if you are looking for a relationship, dancing may give you great clues about a guy. How physically comfortable is he and how does this correspond with your own comfort levels in being physical? How interested is your dance partner in making a **salsa connection** with you? My guess is that if he doesn't connect with you in ways you can experience on the dance floor, he'll likely not be able to off the floor. If he blames you for his dance mistakes ... you've learned something important about him. If he shows off his dance moves and pays no attention to you ... you've learned something important. If he assumes you know nothing and proceeds to constantly instruct you ... you've learned ... You get the point. A social dance relationship reveals loads about a person and how they will approach other social and personal relationships. This is why I think dancing is actually a pretty great place to meet and get to know people.

Part X: Flow and the Salsa Connection

One of the many amazing things about salsa dancing is how it absorbs dancers into the dancing. You know that experience! You go out dancing and you may not even feel very motivated to dance; then you hear the music and you get a partner and start dancing. Before you know it several hours have passed and you can't understand what happened to the time.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called this experience “flow” and, while this word is still used, many today may more likely call this experience “zone” or “being in the zone.” Csikszentmihalyi studied the phenomenon as experienced by rock climbers and surgeons among others. What he was interested in was to identify how flow happens and what its significance is to our lives. Csikszentmihalyi believes that the experience of “flow” corresponds with the experience of happiness. No wonder we dance all night. It makes us happy! Salsa dancing is fun.

Flow occurs when there is a correspondence of *action* and *awareness*. This simply means flow is experienced when we are aware only of our actions; when we are in our moment; when we are fully present to what we do. This makes sense. We’re not, in some part, standing beside ourselves commenting on our dancing as we are doing it; rather we are wholly absorbed in our dancing.

Csikszentmihalyi found that an important factor in creating flow is the match between the challenge of our activity and our skill or ability. He found that flow is most likely to occur when we experience a challenge demanding our fullest concentration on our activity, but that if the challenge becomes too great, too much beyond our present skill level, we experience anxiety and may simply shut down. If the challenge is too low, then we tend to get bored and thus distracted from what we are doing.

So how does this work in my teaching and understanding of salsa dancing based on the **salsa connection**? I think it is an important way of understanding the connection between partners. Both need to be present and active to be connected. Flow occurs when both partners are connected to one another and to the music through being actively and fully present and attentive to the connection to one another. Dancing creates an amazing opportunity for two people to merge in their experience of flow, their shared and interactive sense of the identity of their action and awareness. I also think this understanding of flow is relevant to different levels of skill between partners. If there is a mismatch of skill levels, there is a greater chance for either one to be bored or the other to feel anxious. If either occurs clearly there will be no **salsa connection**, no flow, and consequently the dancing won’t be fun. It is important for dancers to understand this. It doesn’t mean that dancers should only dance with partners that push, but comfortably so, their skill level, although this can work. It does mean that dancers can still have fun by focusing on creating the **salsa connection** with whomever they are dancing. This will require that partners attend to one another and find their challenge in discovering and adjusting skill and effort to match the other’s skill levels rather than exacerbating the differences between skill levels. It means that the challenge is in making the **salsa connection** and this is always a challenging part of salsa dancing.

This idea of flow also relates to my teaching which I call “Salsa Challenge.” I hate the term “boot camp” so often used now. Who ever enjoyed boot camp? This is an experience designed to painfully break down and rebuild the participants. While the military may feel this is necessary, I much prefer the idea of the challenge that pushes the existing level of skill so as to entice growth and development that is fun and exciting. Some call this creative stress. I believe that in teaching longer classes (most of mine are 2 to 2 ½ hours) students can get in that flow and by constantly keeping the level of challenge just above the level of skill, dancers learn the most and do so the most quickly. The challenge for me as a teacher is

to understand where students are and adjust the speed and level of teaching accordingly to keep the majority from either feeling anxious or bored.

Part XI: Existentialism and the Salsa Connection

Some of you know that I am not only a salsa teacher/dancer, but also an academic. I have taught at the University of Colorado as Full Professor since 1983 (hmm, how can that be as young as I am?). For over a decade I have been doing research and teaching topics related to dance traditions around the world and to understanding what it is that distinguishes dancing as a human activity. This research has taken me to many fields of study and to read and think about lots of things.

One of the most provocative areas I have been interested in is the philosophical writings of a Frenchman named Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His research was on human perception. Most theories of perception see the human body as kind of a box with the senses being something like instruments that detect what is outside the box and bring it in the box. Merleau-Ponty's revolutionary work found that bodies aren't boxes that passively receive information from outside through the senses, but rather that we interact with the world beyond our skin in creative ways. Our senses are actively creating the world as they sense the world and this is based on the nature of the human body including the mind/brain. He showed that we interactively create and discover the world all the time.

Merleau-Ponty's principal inspiration for this view was the simple situation in which we touch one hand with the other. One is touching the other, but this can easily be reversed so that the hand doing the touching is actually touched by the other hand. This flip-flopping, or reversibility, as the two hands are of one body, shows the two are inseparable, that is, in some sense also one. He referred to this reversibility using the term chiasm which is a crossing place. We can also think of it as modeled by a mobius strip which has both two and one sides simultaneously. Another kind of illustration is to think of M C Escher prints where a tiny shift in focus flips back and forth the images we see (<http://www.mcescher.com/>). Extending this analogy of one hand touching the other, Merleau-Ponty believed that all perception is of this nature. As we see the world, we are also seen (in some sense) by the world and so on. The point is really that perception is interactive; it is the active presentation of things outside us for us to perceive while it is, at the same time, our actively seeking the world beyond us, creating it and our experience of it in the terms of the history of our experience and expectations, in terms that are dictated by the biology and physiology of the human body. The body and mind are inseparable as are the perceiving human being and the world the human being perceived. Well, that is a pretty quick and dirty presentation of Merleau-Ponty and ideas I have been contemplating for years.

The point here, really, is that, as I have been thinking about how fundamental the **salsa connection** is to salsa dancing, I realize that it is chiasmatic or mobiotic in the same sense that Merleau-Ponty described. The two partners creating the **salsa connection** are indeed separate people, individual dancers, yet, in their dancing, in their creating a **salsa connection**, they are also one, that is, a connected flowing unified entity. They are two, yet one; one, yet two. But the full realization of this amazing structurality is experienced only at that point when together they realize the **salsa connection**.

XII: Thumbs Up!

In the evolution of human beings, the development of the thumb is, as Friedrich Engels noted, of critical importance. Without a thumb, we cannot easily hold tools to make things to hold and exchange. The thumb is surely also the inspiration for all our interest in holding, grasping, clasping, handedness, specialization (even of our brain hemispheres), weapons, and handshakes. In turn, the thumb is the culprit in loss and loosing. We measure value in terms of the direction of the thumb—thumb up is winner, down is loser. Ethologists and evolutionists have long known the opposing thumb a distinctive mark of humans. Thumbs also play a telling role in dancing both as makings and in making ideal relationships. I'll consider the role of thumbs in a discussion of salsa partner dancing.

Salsa, as most social dancing, is commonly done by male-female partnering couples. The dance is based on a simple basic rhythm patterned combination of steps. On this foundation, the improvisational dance is built up (notice the language of making) from just a few conventional elements of movement. Traditionally teaching the dance involves establishing the rhythm patterned basic steps and then teaching combinations of the movement elements. In my teaching the males, who are invariably the leads, are obsessed with learning moves. This is very consistent with the values of our society. The best dancers are those with the most moves, or so it seems most believe. Moves are seen as external productions. Actions intended to impress one's dance partner; and, of course, make other males envious. In my experience, women, the follows, are mostly taught to anticipate the lead, often through rather obvious external signs, including even some guy's tendency to actually verbally tell the woman what he is about to do. Teaching in this way, which I did for many years, I was always shocked to see the results of my work. Good dancers I was rarely making. I was disturbed to see the jerky, conflicted, awkward, almost violent and hurtful appearance of these dancers. I would see guys wrestle and drag their partners through some complex moves, awkwardly executed and almost always lacking any connection with the rhythm in the music. I'd have to say that this is masculine dancing oriented toward production. It is directed to males making something to fulfill a felt lack, to meet an unmet desire. I have an idea what is missing. This kind of dancing as social dancing displaces social connection with demonstration; partnering with controlling and overpowering manipulation. It is male centered in a western kind of way, despite the unnoticed fact that it is largely the skill and intuition of the women that make it anything other than painful disaster.

I shifted the way I teach several years ago. While I still teach complex move patterns—I'm a North American male after all—I have begun to place a large amount of attention on partner connection, on the art of partnering. What I am interested in teaching is the skill of two people physically connecting through touch. This is the sort of touching that is subtle, requiring only the lightest of physical contact, but where the two bodies are powerfully focused on the interconnection. The connection is one of equality of force and opposition: push against push, pull against pull. It is a skill that clearly works at the subconscious level and requires response times of nanoseconds. It is a connection that might be described as elastic and responsive like a bungee cord, because of the progressive increasing and decreasing forces that are exactly met by the two dancers.

Here is where the thumb comes in. In the male dominating move-making style of dancing, men often connect with their partners by firmly holding the lady's hands using their thumbs to assure the connection. Men dancing this way grasp their partners with their thumbs powerfully engaged so as to better control and use the woman as a tool of their exhibition. The strong use of thumbs in this context says it all.

The innovations of technique I apply to teaching dancing is to never—well, almost never—allow the use of thumbs. Rather the guy's middle finger tips are placed on the woman's palm where her middle finger meets her palm. Connection is made between a male middle finger or two placed in the middle of the female's inner hand. Without thumbs, the dancers must carefully focus on connection, on maintaining a connection, on connective interaction and movement. Leading and following must become interdependent, co-equal, interactive, subtle, and sensitive. Leading and following require constant feedback looping or play. Touch and touching are the foundation of the connection.

The dancing that corresponds with this connectivity is very different. The dance is focused primarily on the physical connection. Moves, or movement combinations, arise out of this connection rather than out of male productiveness. Sensitivity to the connection demands that the dancing is compatible with the experience both dancers have in connecting and maintaining the connection. Dancers trained in this way find the experience of dancing very different: smooth, social, interactive, sensuous, playful, and, yes, seductive. Still, I find this is a difficult skill to teach and, for many, to learn. While most immediately get the idea, understand the principles, our long cultural and personal conditioning have established deep sensorimotor patternings that most simply default to when they aren't concentrating on this specific element. I suggest that to develop these new sensorimotor skills corresponds with deep changes in relationship skills.

Such an approach is also interesting from the perspective of making. Elsewhere, I have discussed dancing, all dancing, as a kind of making. The distinction of this making is that the thing made, the dance, is physically identical, yet separable from, the maker, the dancer. There is then a kind of reversibility between dance and dancer, between maker and thing made. The play back and forth between maker and made, dancer and dance, is the basis for our fascination with dance and dancing. It accounts for dancing playing a special role in exercising perhaps our most distinctive human abilities. It allows one to experience with one's own body the thing make, that is, the dance which is at once separate from the dancer and identical to the dancer. I call this self-othering and believe it to be key to what distinguishes our dancing. In dancing we make an other, the danced entity, yet that other is manifest in the body of the dancer and can be experienced in the very same way that we experience ourselves, that is proprioceptively. We know this other in the same way we know ourselves.

Now, in the social dance setting dance and dancer are two persons, not one. While in dancing each is making an other in their own bodies, they are also making a danced entity together. There is a compound reversibility since each dancer is experiencing in her and his own body the danced entity each creates while dancing—sassy chica or suave guy, for example—each is also collaborating to create an entity as a couple. And this entity is also physically and emotionally felt. It is the experience of relationship, of partnering, of relating, of interacting.

This partner entity created in partner dancing is not only bodily felt and experienced by the dancers, but it is made palpable to those watching. As dancers we feel the relationship we make with another dancer. As spectators we also feel the relationship others make in dancing. My thoughts here are about the role the lead's thumbs play in the creation of this experience. I recently observed a salsa dance competition and paid careful attention to the use of thumbs by the lead dancers. I was surprised that even for the professional dancers the thumb was often telling. Many competitors could be observed to have a heavy use of thumbs and these correlated strongly with an observable disconnect and imbalance between partners. I also noticed that in choreographed routines there is sometimes little meaningful contact between partners because each has memorized and is executing her and his moves independently. Connection has to be not only apparent but real for even competition dancing to show that the partners in a couple are actually relating to one another. The ideal relationship, after all, is what performance dancers should be creating and showing their spectators.

Well, when the dance is done with thumbs, this marks the masculine intent to produce rather than to relate; there is no reversibility or relating among partners, there is only the male thrusting forward controlling the female bent on showing, making, impressing. However, without thumbs, with thumbs up and out of the way, the two are much more likely to move as one, with fluidity, with grace, with ease. There are two, yet in their connection, they experience a oneness; they experience a reversibility; they play with one another without meaning or goal or product.