

# The Conversation of Dance

*A short version of this essay was printed in the Spring, 2005, OFB newsletter. Here is the complete article.*

Dance is like a conversation. Every nuance on the dance floor between you and your partner is an unspoken comment in a continually evolving process of getting to know each other.

As with any conversation, we have social protocols that define appropriate and inappropriate language. There seems to be a widespread notion in our contra dance community that those protocols have been suspended. There seems to be this idea that because the contra dance culture embraces men in skirts, same-gender partners, and other symbols of liberalism, that liberal dismissal of conventional politeness and respect is somehow condoned. It is not.

Contra dance has a prescribed dance space for each partner, with a good foot of space between bodies and a firm frame.

Sleaze dancing violates the conventional dance spaces and includes any of the following: holding your partner closer than the conventional move calls for, getting "in your partner's face," or putting your hands anywhere other than where the conventional move dictates. This is unacceptable with anyone you do not know well. Inappropriate dancing also includes forcing someone into a twirl when you have no knowledge of their history of shoulder injuries, and dipping someone when they least expect it.

Dips, twirls and cuddly pivot-swings can be lots of fun -- between friends. But please understand, most of the outrageous but safe flirtation that we all enjoy so much on the dance floor is actually flourish added onto the basic moves BY CHOICE. As with any social encounter, if you force someone into something, rather than making sure it's a mutual choice, you have violated basic social protocols. (If you don't know how contra dance moves are done in their conventional form (for example, if you think a ladies chain includes a twirl), please ask -- any caller will be glad to show you the unadulterated style).

Before you have permission to twirl, dip, or sleaze someone, you have to develop a rapport with them. You have to get to know their preferences, their dance skills, and their comfort level. You do this by starting out doing the moves the conventional way. Once you are dancing comfortably together, you can offer an opportunity for a twirl and see if they take it. Maybe on one particular swing, you can try a slightly closer hold and see if they smile or struggle. You learn someone's boundaries by slowly and respectfully testing limits and judging the response. If the response seems positive, you stay at that level for a while and then take the next step. If it still seems positive, you have permission to go a little further. At the end of the dance, if things have gone well, you

could try a very gentle lean and see if your partner gives you their weight or tries to resist. And if at any time the response is negative, you BACK OFF.

By following these cues over several dances, the stranger gradually becomes a friend. You develop an understanding of each other's preferences and dance skills. You establish a history of trust, and a style of flirting that is acceptable to both parties. And so it may come to pass that when you meet this person at a dance, it can be acceptable within this friendship to twirl a zillion times, smash yourselves together as you swing, and dip long and low. It would be nice if you could manage to be on time for the next move with your neighbor, but that is another discussion.

One more important point: It really does take two to tango. Both partners have responsibilities in this developing relationship. Either dancer can initiate a test -- tiptoe toward the next level of intimacy to see how it goes. It is the other partner's job to respond. Since silence may be considered acquiescence, no response is still a response. So if someone tries something with you that you don't like, it is your job to let them know: Resist; push them away; tell them verbally -- with coyness, brazenness, or whatever tone suits your style - - but let them know. It is then the job of the initiator to respect the response. Take the hint. Get a clue. If you pull someone in for a closer-than-conventional swing, and they struggle or resist, DON'T DO IT AGAIN. Contrary to popular belief, sleazing (or twirling, or dipping, or any other flourish) is not a God-given right. It is a privilege. You may not presume that it is acceptable. You must be given permission from your partner, through the subtly evolving conversation of the dance.

The contra dance culture DOES embrace a pretty liberal level of free-spiritedness, flirtation, and innuendo. But it has NOT discarded mutual respect as a first and foremost tenet that guides our behavior toward each other. We're all here to dance and make friends. So please, take time to get to know someone before you pull out all the stops. Respect everyone's individual comfort zone, even if it's more conservative than yours (especially if it's more conservative than yours!). And please don't sleaze, twirl, or dip the newcomers prematurely. We want them to come back.

-- by Diane Silver

