

Getting Into the Swing of Things

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It felt very strange the first time I went to a dance where you change partners after every song. My life before had been as a couple: Everything is done as a couple and you always have the same partner, until you don't.

The hell of a divorce and the depression that went with it had made me look for some sense of heaven. I found it contra dancing at [Glen Echo Park](#).

We humans are social animals, and in contra dancing we are in essence one large organism, like a hive of bees dancing to the caller and driven by the beat of the energetic music. Each dancing couple interacts with the couples on the left and the right in an unending progression of mathematical relationships. Engineers love this precision of the dance. Over an evening one can almost dance with everyone in the room, sometimes as many as 400 people. The movement, mental concentration and spiritual engagement open the mind to precision and clarity, while spinning like an amusement park ride teaches us to be flexible, to let go.

With the simplicity of this dance -- at Glen Echo there are no classes, only a half-hour introduction before the dance -- we can believe we are performing an activity to perfection. To my surprise, I could do this aerobic exercise and I began to dance every Sunday night from 7:30 until 10:30.

I was so very shy at first and glad just to be with all these people. It is the perfect environment for introverts: One can just say hello, dance and say goodbye, no stress, no fuss. I was with people and I was safe and yet I could also keep to myself. Over the next year or so, I began to talk with my dance partners and learned that another dance took place on Friday nights. Now I try to learn everyone's name. I forget so many but I persist and soon I can remember a name from several weeks ago. I meet about 10 new people every week. At that rate, if, God willing, I continue to dance for 30 more years, I'll have the opportunity to memorize the names of 15,000 people.

The magic of Glen Echo is that everyone can share his or her love of dancing. No one wants to miss the dance, so anyone who needs a partner can find one. Sometimes when men outnumber women, or vice versa, that partner is of the same gender. Age is not a barrier, either. One evening an 8-year-old met another dancer his own age, and they danced with everyone. I see the energetic radiance in the 20-somethings with their enthusiasm and potential. When I dance with a young person, I can believe that I am young again. The 70-somethings have knowledge and experience and grace. All the sad and worrisome things in life fade away as we smile, laugh and move around the room.

My partners are joyous and encouraging as we look into each other's eyes. (Focusing on the eyes helps people keep from getting dizzy.) There are no leaders or followers, just equally matched partners. As we memorize the dance, the caller stops leading and the music carries everyone forward, with each person helping to guide anyone who lost his or her concentration and place in the dance.

The ballroom floor has a spring to it that is easy on the body. With neither air conditioning nor heat, the building flows with the cycles of nature. Dancers warm the room with their energy in the winter and cool themselves with their perspiration in the summer. The complexity of the world is abandoned in the music and the moment. Slowly, then surely, through dancing I learned the habit of joy.