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“I love it! A fun and informative read for dancers with useful information to help you understand and navigate both your dance and personal relationships with more ease.”

—Marcy Garson  
*2010, 2012 US Pro AM Ballroom Champion*



*Dance*  
AND THE  
*Creative Couple*



Applying Lessons from the Ballroom  
to Couple Relationships

*Sheri A. Rosenfeld*  
with Jill Savege Scharff

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*“Love is a Two-Way street Constantly Under Construction”*  
—Caroll Bryant

*“I see dance being used as communication between  
body and soul, to express what is too deep to find for words.”*  
—Ruth St. Denis



*For Sammi, Ella and Gray*  
*Believe in yourself and follow your passion*





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*Young Sheri*

## PROLOGUE

I am often asked, “How did you start ballroom dancing?” The question stirs in me a myriad of childhood memories, fantasies, love and hate, romance and betrayal. Just the mere question catapults me back in time and holds me there as if in a time warp. It is 1968, 1974, 1979 and onward. I lie in bed, another stale summer night without much breeze but the sounds of the trains running by. I feel alone and afraid much of the time. Knowing others in my family are asleep and I am the only one still awake, watching the clock move its hands slowly. Perhaps I am 5 years old or 11 or even 16. The transition from day to evening was always difficult, my body wanting to continue the motion from the day in ballet classes, tap classes, gymnastics, flute practice, recitals of all sorts, my body always in motion and my mind always deep in fantasy. That fantasy world was filled with music, love, romance, princes and princesses.

Many nights before I would go to bed, I would stay up to watch the PBS series of Championship Ballroom Dancing while sitting with my grandmother. My earliest memory of that show was of Juliet Prowse and Ron Montez as hosts and expert commentators. They would describe the various couples in terms of their fluid motions, their charisma, and sometimes their relationship as husband and wife. They provided history and context for the technical moves that the

dancers were displaying on the floor. All the while, I was as mesmerized as any child could be: the thought of dancing with a man like that was forever etched in my brain.

The women dressed in beautiful flowing gowns. Their hair tightly wound in knots. The men in black tuxedo looking handsome and manicured as well. There was order and civility and fantasy all in one. All the while, our world outside was chaotic. The Vietnam War was still going in the 1960s and 1970s. The news was riddled with footage of young men hiding in swamps and overhead helicopters surveying the land. My brother was 15 and there was the possibility that he would be drafted in a few short years. The two worlds could not have been any different and ballroom dancing was the antidote, the answer to the chaos. So as night approached and as I lay in bed I would close my eyes and dream about the day that I would be able to dance like these women. I wanted to be in a man's arms, floating like a princess.

### *Becoming a dancer*

And I became a dancer—ballet, contemporary and lyrical jazz — never giving up, even while having 3 children and building a clinical practice as a psychotherapist, but certainly my dance career was attenuated as I met the demands of family life. Until, one day, someone introduced me to a woman who invited me to come watch a ballroom competition. And that, frankly, was the beginning of a new world, a reinvented self, and the final expression of a lifelong dream.

Now I am connecting this new world with my current world. At home I am a mother of grown children and a wife in a 31-year marriage. Outside the home, I am a psychodynamic couple therapist and an amateur ballroom dancer with national and international titles. This sometimes surprises people because they see therapy and dance as very different: Dance is art in motion for expressing emotion in relationship; therapy is art in stillness for understanding emotion in

relationship. But ballroom dance and couple therapy are similar in that they are just variations of the art of being in touch with a partner.

It may also surprise people to find that I have two names, Sheri Rosenfeld, my name as a couple therapist, and then Sophia d'Angelo, my stage name as a ballroom dancer. There are many people in the dance world who know me only as Sophia, and therapy colleagues and couples who know me only as Sheri. As a therapist I wanted to respect the usual ethical guidelines of maintaining a low profile on my personal life. I also wanted to separate my progress as a beginning competitive dancer from my work as an established therapist as not to intrude on the couple's imagination of who I am. That way of thinking developed in the decades before patients routinely google their therapists and know much more background than before. It is now impossible to maintain personal anonymity, and I am now comfortable to bring the connection between my official name and my stage name together in the same place.

### *Being a therapist*

In my years spent as a therapist to couples and families, I have been most intrigued by the complexity of relationships. I am in awe of how and why one person connects with another and who they choose to be with. How do they each manage their worlds as independent beings coming together to create another being, that is *the relationship*. How do people navigate the complex road in a relationship and how do they understand themselves in a couple? What does it all mean? How can I understand them in a new way? How can I speak to the couple in a way that feels useful and engaging?

Once I began dancing and training, an average of 20 hours a week, competing at 20 major competitions a year all over the country and the world, studying with the best of the best in the ballroom industry and winning in world class competitions, I began to see relationships in the light of my experience with various partners on the dance floor.

What I say as a dancer and how I describe ballroom dancing comes from years of dancing as a competitive amateur athlete training with these partners, teachers and coaches. I am NOT a professional nor do I believe I know and understand everything about ballroom dancing perfectly. What I say should all be taken in as my interpretation of what it feels like and what I was told. It is not the golden truth. What I say as a therapist comes from years of professional training and practice working psychodynamically with many couples. I now look at these couples' various concerns, mismatches, and difficulties in reaching shared goals through the lens of partnered dancing. I certainly don't teach dance steps to the couples I treat: I apply what I have learned about the mind-body connection, non-verbal communication, emotional connection, and partnering skills in dance to help couples move beyond the problems of verbal miscommunication. I now understand the couples who seek my help, whether friends in trouble or couples in my therapy office in the metaphors drawn from dance. To convey what I have learned about relationships from working with couples, I have created vignettes by melding and distilling my experience with numerous couples into composites to illustrate my points, and I make up names for them to bring them alive to you. These are not actual treatments with real couples but imaginative reconstructions of the kinds of relationship problems I have experienced. I think we can all recognize parts of ourselves in these vignettes.

### *Being in a couple relationship*

I want to bridge the worlds of couples learning to partner on the dance floor and couples in intimate relationships—not only men and women. The lessons from the dance floor apply to all the combinations of “couple”. True, I write as a woman married to a man and dancing with male partners, but I hope that what I say from my experience as a ballroom dancer can be useful to same sex and gender-fluid couples

who dance or commit to life partnerships as well. Of course there are major differences, but the general basics of partnering hold true. The repeating configuration in which my partner is always a man calls for some patience with the manners of the ballroom, so I hope you will please freely translate “man” as “lead” to fit your needs. It is not the male-female aspect of the analogy that I am focused on. What I am applying in my work as a couple therapist is the mutuality of leading and following, listening and responding, living in mind and body in interaction with another in a committed partnership. After all, this book is meant to reach all types of relationships where it is important to understand boundaries, desire, struggle, space, movement, timing, and touch. What does it feel like, what does it mean to be coupled, to be in relationship? The relationships I have encountered in my years as a ballroom dancer can be just as intricate, without a romantic component, as in any marriage. They are complicated and filled with nuance, passion, love, confusion, pain, complications, and work.

### *Shedding light on couples' difficulties*

Living with a partner and being in relationship can, most often, be a battle of words, misunderstandings, loving intentions but with the wrong delivery, and so on. Couple therapy is usually conducted in the verbal realm. In contrast, dancing with a partner is the ultimate communication without words. Using symbolic language from the physical realm, I am able to shed a better light on what is not working for the couples I treat. It's not that I dance with my patients as if that would help them get better. In fact, like most therapists, I don't touch them at all. It's that I help them use non-verbal communication, holding hands, maintaining eye contact, listening to each other with empathy, to re-establish a true basis for verbal communication. I find that simple exercises like that help partners listen and respond differently, reestablish connection to their feelings and to the love that brought them together. They learn to lead and follow and create a road

map towards becoming a working couple. In this direct way, and in the associations to partnered dance that I make in my mind, I bring the lessons from dance to understanding couple relationships.



*Dance*  
AND THE  
*Creative Couple*



# INTRODUCTION

I am a dancer. In that small definition lives a life of daily classes in all forms of dance, ballet recitals; auditioning for colleges to study ballet and modern dance; and culminating in a short lived but wonderfully exciting professional career. But, I am also a wife and mother and a psychotherapist. My decision to stop dancing was difficult but well worth it as I focused on raising my three children and getting my Master's Degree in Social Work. I continued to dance, however, not professionally. I supported dance performance and dance education and taught children at various schools around the Washington DC area. While studying to get my Master's Degree, and ultimately specializing as a psychoanalytic couple therapist, I began to think my days as a dancer were over. Then one day my children were launched, and I discovered ballroom dancing. My life as a dancer jump-started again, and I launched myself wholeheartedly into the world of partnered dancing.

## *The ballroom dance world*

The world of ballroom dance poses a new challenge to the already trained individual dancer. I have to use my dancer's intelligence that is hopefully already cognitive, emotional, artistic, and kinesthetic, and now I have to develop it in partnership with another. He and I have to

integrate physicality, intentionality, musicality, memory, and sensibility. Then we have to combine our individual qualities in a seamless lead-and-follow partnership. We aim to become a sensitively attuned pair moving safely not only separately but also in unison and in rhythm through the space and time of the dance according to the laws of physics and aesthetics.

For those of you who are not dancers, I want to describe the world of ballroom dance. I am also writing for those of you are not dancers YET; I am hoping this book will encourage you to take to the dance floor for healthy partnered exercise, as well as help you think about your couple relationship. You can enjoy social dance at the local studio you have seen when you drive by, and some day, maybe you will drop in.

Beyond that world of social recreation lies the work of competitive ballroom dance, referred to as DanceSport. Competitive ballroom dance is not a highly visible world, and it hasn't always been recognized as a serious athletic competition like ice dancing or diving. In fact the competitions are occurring like a vibrant underground activity all over the world every week of the year in hotel ballrooms and conference centers. These competitions are organized by official dance organizations. My personal favorite, and the one that governs the competitions at which I compete when in the United States, is the National Dance Council of America, Inc. (NDCA). Following are some statistics in case you like to know the facts, and if not, you can just skip the next paragraph.

NDCA is the official governing council of traditional ballroom dance in the USA with 17 member organizations encompassing more than 20,000 dance professionals and over 140 sanctioned competitions, and outreach to at least 200,000 amateur dancers. Dancers in DanceSport competition compete in Professional and Pro-Am sections. Amateurs like me compete with a seasoned pro, placed in the appropriate age divisions and multiple levels of proficiency within bronze, silver, and gold categories, their rankings calculated on

a system of proficiency points earned in qualifying events (see [www.NDCA.org](http://www.NDCA.org)). According to a uniform set of defined standards, we are graded on connection, symmetry, grounding and navigation, frame, topline, position, contact, movement of hands and feet, musicality, posture, musical timing, pleasing lines, musicality and expression, appropriate characterization, and overall performance.

Dances fall into two main categories, 10-dance International which includes Standard (waltz, foxtrot, tango, Viennese waltz and quickstep) and Latin (cha-cha, rumba, samba, paso doble, jive; and 9-dance American which includes Smooth (waltz, foxtrot, tango, Viennese waltz) and Rhythm (cha-cha, rumba, swing, bolero and mambo). These dances are described in Alex Moore's book *Ballroom Dancing* for anyone interested in the details of technique. What distinguishes American Smooth from Standard is that we are allowed to break hold and dance apart, and that means we can extend our arms freely to enhance expression in relation to the music. In Standard we stay in hold. I compete in the Pro-Am section, at the Open Gold level, where my pro and I are free to execute complicated choreography. Both Standard and Smooth dances are elegant and romantic, the gowns long and flowing, while the Latin dances are sexy and teasing, the gowns reduced to very little fabric to cover just the essentials.

### *Lessons from the ballroom for the couple in daily life*

As I entered deeper and deeper into the ballroom competition world with my partners, and delved deeper into the issues of couples I worked with as a therapist, I saw so many important parallels. And I found validation for my ideas in professional literature. For instance, in *The American Psychoanalyst*, Johanna Arenaza, a psychoanalyst and trained dancer, describes therapy as a dance between two people “at times harmonious, each taking turns at leading the other; at other times, the dance is more syncopated, requiring a particular effort and better communication.” Two associate professors from Yale—Emily

Coates, a dancer in the Theater Studies program, and Sarah Demers in the Physics department who recently wrote the book *Physics and Dance*—value “the multifaceted understanding that can develop from conjoining different ways of knowing the same thing” because the “dialogue between art and science can enrich our understanding of both.” Well said.

Often when I was listening to a couple in therapy, I would liken their concerns to what it is like to be in a ballroom partnership. Whether or not I actually described the parallels to the couple in therapy, they were always there helpfully in the back of my mind. Now I want to bring them forward and share them. Using examples from the ballroom and from couple therapy, I show how the fundamentals of dance apply to creating a successful love relationship in everyday life.

To begin at the beginning, let’s review a list of basic instructions from a dance teacher to a partner. Each instruction embodies a principle for achieving a successful dance partnership. I will explore and develop these principles in the following chapters. These basic lessons I have taken in from my teachers are always in the back of my mind. I relate the dancing couple in the ballroom to the loving couple in everyday life, as the bodily metaphors translate to the couple state of mind. So let’s take a look at that list, and orient ourselves to what is to come:

### *Basic principles*

- Wait for me.
- When I reach my hand to you then you will know that I am ready.
- Follow and lead takes attunement to both your body in space and our connection. Listen with your body.
- Relax. Let go. If you muscle your way through than we cannot move in unison and you are then doing it alone.

- Connect with me: Our eyes and hands send kinetic messages for direction and communication. It will let you know if I have to make a sudden change, and without words we can successfully navigate together.
- Be aware that there is your space, and there is my space. Do not move into my space.
- Although we move as one, I still need space to move; you will as well.
- I will get out of your way when you need to move past me; but we need to find each other immediately after.
- As we meet, line up your right side with my left side so that we are connected
- Let me know that we are attached but don't lean on me so heavily that I cannot move.
- Hold your own body weight, stand on your own feet. When I am the leader, I use our connection to guide. I, as the follower, can listen better if we are securely connected.
- I will watch over you and protect you from harm, and if you see something coming my way I trust you will do the same for me.

Following these ballroom dance instructions from the teacher/leader to the student/follower, my partner and I will become a sensitively attuned pair. Although the principles derive from the ballroom, they apply as well to the therapeutic relationship and to everyday life within a couple relationship. In chapters that follow, various couple scenarios illustrate the usefulness of dance metaphor for promoting a sensitive, effective partnership. Let's begin by meeting a couple I will call Arthur and Betty.

*Couple therapy vignette of Arthur and Betty: Beyond words*

A couple enters my therapy office in great struggle. Arthur is feeling lost in the relationship. His desire for Betty, he feels, is not equally met. They live apart for some parts of the year and together for other parts. Arthur's sleep is affected, and so is his health. He feels torn

between acquiescing to all her needs and losing an important part of himself if he does. Betty longs as much as he does for a deep connection. But she is torn between wanting to move away from her hometown to live with him and being afraid of losing part of herself. She struggles with their communication style, and wonders if she is being heard or taken in. He feels he is not listened to or responded to. Nevertheless they make love every night. They say that is the way for them to stay connected.

As I sit with them I am struck by the lack of rhythm in their way of relating or perhaps a kind of rhythm that takes each one off balance. They live apart and then together and then apart again. In the session I can sense the space being encroached upon and exited. I feel their fear of losing personal space and being lost in togetherness if they are too connected. But then there is the juxtaposition of the nightly lovemaking. How can I account for that?

And then I have a vision of myself ballroom dancing. As I move with my partner on the dance floor I see the look in his eyes, signaling me that someone is coming up behind me. I feel the light squeeze of his hand as he leads me into a spin but stops me mid-spin in order to avoid the crash of two couples. I realize at that moment that what has happened between my partner and me is what I feel is missing in the couple sitting in my office. Where is the body language? Where is the knowing glance? Where is the metaphorical squeeze? And then it dawns on me that perhaps these signs are there between the couple but they are misfiring and being misread. Perhaps the body language is interpreted in a malevolent way. Just maybe, instead of feeling like a benign, caring signal of the present moment, the glance or the metaphorical squeeze operates as a trigger for a feeling of distrust and expectation of harm experienced in a past intimate relationship or during the earliest years with the mother or father. What then becomes of that look and touch? It forms a toxic, stuck pattern of response.

How can this couple move back into the rhythm of the dance? How can I help them move in unison but not lean on each other so much as



to hinder their movement? How does one partner get quiet enough to hear the other's body and understand his rhythm not just her own?

Once again I move to the dance floor in my mind. I notice that when I am dancing I hear the music and feel the beating of the drum but I am also aware of my body in space and of his body in action. There is no greater sensation than two bodies in complete unison. Moving as one body. How do we translate this to help a couple make a deep connection in everyday life?

I mention to Arthur and Betty that more words pass between them than is necessary. Words become tangled in the mind, and the mind takes over to where the body can no longer feel. I ask them to imagine moving together on a dance floor holding each other close but not tight. I ask them to imagine what would happen if they could not speak but needed to send a signal of either distress or joy but only with their eyes and the touch of their hands? They stop for a moment to think. The room becomes quiet and the air thinner. I watch as their bodies begin to relax, their muscle tension softens, their facial expressions loosen. They look at each other and gaze for a few moments. Something is being transferred to the other which will, hopefully, be imprinted in the body as a warm sensation, a light in the eye, a relaxed mindful togetherness. They are beginning to take each other in.

This couple can already connect their bodies in nightly sexual interaction. However their physical and passionate connection is split off from their mental and emotional communication in daily interaction. They cannot connect their minds. This exercise asks them to relate with their bodies in a state of contemplation. When the couple concentrates on the two bodies in communication, bodily connection moves to mental attunement. There is a delicate balance of body and mind within a couple. It is at this point of balance that a therapist has the leverage to change the couple's dynamics. It is here that a couple can find the change they need to become a creative couple.



*The touch of their hands*  
Max Sinita and Sophia d'Angelo  
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## CHAPTER 1

# WAIT FOR ME

**W**ait! Wait! Seems like a simple request, but waiting is a complex notion. When we wait it can call up so many emotions. What is the waiting for? How do I hold onto or contain the anxiety of the waiting? What do I do while I am waiting?

Let's look at the simple notion of "Wait for me" as it applies to ballroom dancing. The man is asking you to simply stand still and wait for his sign. Wait until he holds his left hand out to you to let you know he is ready. Your connection to his hand lets him know you are ready. In this way he calls you into his arms. It may seem to have a romantic and seductive quality to it. It may seem domineering and authoritative. Either way, the man is the driver. To the 21st Century woman this may seem foreign. In the ballroom, it just simply is. We accept it as a convention. You wait to feel comfortable, you enter his frame, and you hold your own. Again it needs to be said, I write from the perspective of a female dancing with a male lead, which until recently, was the required configuration on the competition floor.

On September 23, 2019, in a landmark decision, the first same sex and gender neutral couples were accepted on the dance floor in all forms of competition, professional and amateur. Same sex and gender fluid couples choose which partner will learn the moves of the leader, and which will learn the steps of the follower. Each has a part to play.

Leader and follower each will play an equally important role in creating a partnership capable of navigating a dance floor at speed or a family life full of challenge and surprise.

Just because the man as the lead has been the convention in the ballroom until this year doesn't mean that the man is inevitably in charge in a couple partnership in everyday life. All I mean is that life partners can agree which of them is in the lead at various times. I think a lot can be learned from leading and following. Ballroom partnering teaches the leader to indicate intention clearly, select direction thoughtfully and confidently, create space for the partner, negotiate obstacles and respond to feedback, while the follower learns to listen, adapt, trust, authorize, move into the space without undermining, holding back or taking over, and make a unique contribution to the partnership. Getting it right is worth the wait.

### *Wait! Anxious moment or welcome pause?*

When I work with couples, the expectation of waiting takes on many meanings. Why would I wait when my desires feel like they cannot be met? How do I wait when I feel so hungry for your love? What if I wait and nothing comes of it and I am left empty of love and yet filled with desire?

These are real and valid concerns that I hear from couples. But waiting, as we do in ballroom dancing, gives the necessary pause for orientation and trust that a couple needs before the emotional couple journey begins.

### *Waiting to include another in your space*

Waiting gives each person the necessary moment to move from standing alone to standing together and to become a couple in that moment. What comes after that critical moment is what the journey is about, and what this book is about. We need to give ourselves time

and space to develop our ability to move from the individual state to the couple state. Our anxiety of being alone needs to be contained while we confront the multitude of questions that are involved when we contemplate including another into our space and into our life. As we connect in that moment in ballroom dancing, as in our couple relationship, that split second of waiting becomes filled with questions, and sometimes trepidation, about the upcoming journey. If the partnership does not feel strong, if the partners are not in unison, then what lies ahead may be a rough road as they continue on separate paths, or simply a few minutes of discomfort as the couple works through the bumps.

The waiting, as we define it in the ballroom, is required so that each person can become better prepared and ready for what is ahead. If we could do that in our love relationships how much better might the outcome be?

*John and Patty: Wait for me*

I once met a couple who came to me to discuss the problem of the woman who couldn't wait. Her impatience was said to be ruining the relationship. The couple was in their thirties and both felt the need to "make this relationship work" because they agreed that time was running out for them. Even though the issues were significantly distressing, they both wanted to work through them and move on to marriage and children. Patty wanted John to propose immediately and move forward. John wanted Patty to continue waiting so that he could feel that this was really the step he wanted to take. Patty felt that as time was passing perhaps they could just continue to work on the issues in their relationship while getting married and having children. John had more than just cold feet; he had serious reservations about their compatibility. But, for Patty, not being able to wait was part and parcel of the behavior that troubled John. It was a catch-22.

## *Waiting: Withholding or controlling?*

As I began to learn ballroom dancing, my teacher would ask me to wait. I knew that there were times when I moved too quickly, but while waiting I felt that I had zero control over our partnership. I was afraid that I would have to give up control over myself as well. For a woman in the 21st century, it really is difficult to be asked to hold off. Years of working on my self-efficacy, growing from a girl to a woman, being in control of my life and working in jobs where I had agency led me to a place where waiting felt as if I was giving up control and giving the other too much control. Moreover, I could feel like the other is a withholding figure. But really one, or the leader in this case, is asking both of us for time to acknowledge that we are each individuals. Before we move into being a couple we need a moment's pause for reflection about ourselves and our partner before the dance begins. Pausing and waiting allows each dancer to take into consideration our separateness and our connection. Waiting allows us to time construct a frame. Waiting allows us to sense a lead and follow it.



*Held in the Frame*  
Max Sinitsa and Sophia d'Angelo  
© Charles Ryder Photography

## *Essential frame and boundary*

In the dancing partnership the frame is the crucial foundation for the way the couple will dance. Similarly in our couple relationship at home or in therapy, the frame is critically important. It's an external frame that we can see as the follower steps into the frame the leader provides and joins in creating their shared frame on the dance floor. We can see it in therapy as the business arrangements of setting the appointment, maintaining regularly scheduled sessions that start and stop on time, and collecting a fee for service, which shows that this is a professional situation quite unlike a social chat with a friend. Therapists use the frame to create safety for both client and therapist so that work on intimate relating can take place in a bounded experience. When we know the length of time available, then all the work can be done safely in that time. Running over time or starting too early can create worries: "Am I so in need of therapy that I should be held longer? If my therapist cuts the session short is it because she is angry or uninterested?" These are just a few examples of why the frame in the session is one of the most important elements of therapy.

In our relationships and in dance, the frame is equally important. It establishes boundaries for each person. The external frame I have been describing also has an internal component. It is a frame of mind, an attitude of trust and respect of self and other. Years ago I read a book, "Boundaries: Where You End and I Begin" by Anne Katherine (1993). I often suggest it to my clients. The book defines boundaries and the importance they have for keeping hold of yourself while incorporating the needs of the other. The frame defines a respectful way of understanding and caring for our client, our dance partner, and our life partner. It lets the other know that their space is being valued. A dance can look like a merging of two people and a unison of both movement and of connection, but in reality each dancer must carry their own weight and stand on their own two feet. Establishing a secure frame is worth the wait.

In our couple relationship, the frame we create has boundaries that we stand firm on, but within that secure frame there are some boundaries that allow personal freedom of movement without betrayal. In partnered dancing the frame is important in supporting a secure base from which each of us can move successfully, not only alone but also together. The frame provides a unifying front, so to speak. When the boundary of personal space is broken while dancing with my partner, I call it “bumping.” The timing becomes mismatched, the legs begin to bump into each other, and there is a clear sign that something is off-kilter. When we are misaligned like that, we have no choice but to wait until we can fix it. We slow down and rebalance or even stop, redraw our boundaries, and realign.

When I meet couples in my therapy room, I liken their concerns to what it is like to be in a ballroom partnership. Whether I do that literally or not, I know that in the back of my mind, there are always parallels. Before we connect in our life at home in our couple relationship, each of us has feelings and expectations we each need to take into account. Then we need a moment to become aware that there is another person with feelings and needs. Waiting or pausing just before the moment of connection allows each of us to take into consideration our different realities and needs, our separateness and our connection.

In the beginning of every dance, whether it be International Latin, Standard, American Rhythm or American Smooth, there is a moment when the male partner makes a gesture—whether it be a hand reaching out, a light touch, or an eye signal—giving the woman the sign that he is ready to begin. The music will start and we wait four to eight counts to begin. In Standard dancing the woman (the follower) does not approach until the man (the leader) is ready. The idea behind this is that the woman is the engine but the man is the driver, watching the directions on the floor, usually moving forward while the woman moves backward powerfully creating space for his movement. The lead must navigate, and the follow must trust. Occasionally the woman is led to move forward and then she becomes the driver in whom he must



trust. But for that confidence to build, the waiting is critical. It gives him a moment to find his center, to gather his breath, to think about his direction, and to give the woman a chance to prepare as well.

For the purpose of this book I use the historically conventional terms of “man” for “leader” and “woman” for “follower.” I am doing this to make it simple and personal but I want to be clear that the part of leader and follower can be taken by any gender. The point is that the roles must be assigned and agreed upon.



*Wait for Me*

Max Sinitza and Sophia d'Angelo

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## *Waiting to assess and meet need*

Early on in my relationship as a young mother and my husband as a new father, we both were anxious and excited to be parents. Truthfully, I had much less experience with babies than my husband did. Although we both had babysitting jobs as adolescents, apparently, he was better suited to babysit babies while I often took care of older children. As in all newborn households, there are very serious learning curves to parenting. In our relationship, at that time, we both expressed our anxiety in different ways. In my experience of my husband, I felt that he reacted too quickly to every sound from our daughter without waiting to see what in fact she needed. Our reactions and desire to care for our daughter was the same, but the timing was off. He would move so quickly to her that I often felt useless. I could not get to her as fast, not because I didn't want to or couldn't but our reaction speed was different. We had to work for years through various ways in which our timing for responses were off. I was the more impatient partner for some things and he for others. But the outcome was complicated and frustrating for us both. There was work to be done to find a way where each of us respected the other's timing and at the same time understood the necessity in a partnership to give each person a role and to allow for their individual timing.

This work provided a basis for meeting a later challenge we faced as a couple in dealing with our anxiety about our son. When he was eight he underwent a series of tests, and we had to wait. Wait for the next test, wait for the diagnosis. We learned that he had a rare form of bone cancer. He went through years of multiple operations, and we went through years of worrying and waiting for results. At first it seemed that our worries would be insurmountable. I'll come back to this in Chapter 10, but for now I'll keep it short. We got through it. The point is: I learned something valuable about waiting. I learned that in the moments between not knowing and knowing, there is

peace. There is a feeling of timelessness. There is nothing to do and nowhere to go, until you get the result and the next recommendation.

*“Wait for me; otherwise I feel useless”*

Admittedly, on the dance floor we don't face the same level of anxiety over the threat of loss of a loved one, but we do face the same need to care for the other through being able to wait during anxious moments. On the dance floor, my Theatre Arts partner and I were working on a very difficult lift. We were new at this style of dance, which is a specialized contemporary style of ballroom dancing that includes lifts. Lifts in a performance piece take great concentration, tremendous trust between the two dancers, perfect timing, and immeasurable amounts of waiting for each other to find the correct connection to whatever body part is being held. I learned early on in my training with Michael that it was imperative that we connect with our eyes, which lets the other know that we are ready for the lift. It is usually the one being lifted that must wait for the lifter because he needs to feel ready and capable of the effort. Early on in our work together, I often would be anxious about the lift and eager to get it right, I would move faster than Michael was ready for me to move. We agreed that if I did not wait it both put us in danger and rendered him useless. His job is to be there for me, but if I move faster and jump rather than waiting to be lifted, he is out of a job as my partner.

*John and Patty continued*

Patty didn't understand the importance of waiting until John was ready. John felt that Patty was continually obsessed with the idea of marriage, yet unwilling to give him the time he needed. Patty assumed that John's reticence about proceeding meant that he didn't love her. It meant rejection rather than lack of readiness. Admittedly it had been five years since they began dating. Ready, she felt, meant love. He

argued that his reticence was not about rejection but rather a need of his to find the right moment.



*Trusting him*

Michael Choi and Sophia d'Angelo

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More significantly for my work as their couple therapist, John said he needed time to work through some of the issues that they had, such

as her inability to give him the time to go out with his friends. He felt she was unable to give him this, his much-needed nights out with his guy friends. Instead of recognizing his need for space as an ongoing right, Patty felt that if he still needed to be with his male friends, then that was a sign that he wasn't ready. All of these "signs" that she saw as rejection were rather signs that John needed time to gather himself for making the transition to being a husband. He wanted her to understand that he was asking her to wait until he was ready, not that he wouldn't be ready, but rather that he needed to ground himself and catch his breath. Actually he too was waiting. Waiting to feel ready. Waiting for Patty to change some of her ways of dealing with him.

It's no surprise that the issue appeared in a number of forms as well. The most trying one was that Patty would text or call John, numerous times while he was out with his friends. She couldn't wait for him to get home. Her fear that perhaps he would not return was pervasive. John felt it was an intrusion and Patty felt that his absence was an avoidance of her. John bristled at the intrusion and continued to stay out as a way to assert his independence and reject the intrusion. This is a common interaction in couples who do not have secure attachments to each other. We worked to find the underlying fears and concerns and assumptions in John's avoidance and Patty's pervasive need to be in contact with John.

The ballroom couple, at the onset of connection and movement forward as one, require faith and trust and an abandonment of preconceived notions while knowing that the frame is exactly what is needed to allow each to feel safe and secure. For intimate couples, the frame is equally essential.

With Patty and John we worked on creating a secure frame based on respect and patience. What I saw was a shift in both people. Each learned something about what was in the waiting. For each person there was meaning in waiting or not waiting. But what we can see from their clear descriptions of either anxiety of being the one waiting for the other or the anxiety in feeling the intrusion of the other becomes

story played over in their minds often filled with misperceptions, assumptions, and history. It became a volume of narratives that took them beyond the moment. The idea that waiting for the other could be construed as willful withholding becomes toxic and causes presuppositions. Better to listen to the other's needs and adapt to their timing. Easier said than done.

On one particular session with John and Patty we discussed, in great detail, the assumptions that Patty had about John's need to wait and her various fears about the message John was sending by not moving forward toward marriage. I asked Patty about the notion of time and what it meant to her. There is a time to wait and time to move ahead. She was ready to move ahead. She was already thirty-five and had had other relationships that didn't work out. This is quite common among women of her age, not necessarily connected to the wish to be a mother, but it is simply that they do not want to be single. They become increasingly anxious as the man becomes unable to commit, and her chase leads to his retreat and even withdrawal. It is a vicious cycle.

I asked Patty to look at what she does when she has time on her hands in a day or at work. What I learned from that question was both enlightening to her and to me, as I thought about my own anxiety of waiting for my partner's lead. Patty said that often when she has time on her hands she finds herself filling it with texting, checking her social media on her phone, or calling a friend. Sometimes that friend was John, and when the calls became too insistent he would turn off the phone. It became a dance of intrusive invasion and willful withholding.

I learned that Patty was an only child raised by her father after her mother died when she was a little girl. Two sad people, both missing her mother. Patty often felt anxious waiting for her father to come home from work. John described his family consisting of mother, father and three brothers as close and happy-go-lucky. Later he admitted that his mother had a serious pain pill addiction, and as is common in families dealing with addiction, there were volatile

outbursts at random moments and for unexplainable reasons. John felt that his mother's behavior was an attempt to manipulate John and often resulting in John's acquiescing to whatever his mother's needs might be. John experiences Patty's urgency as coercion. Patty wanted a larger family, but she found John's family too intrusive to meet her needs. She felt an urgency to create her own family to fill the void.

I wondered what might happen if Patty allowed that void to be, or at least to listen to her judgments about why it could not be allowed. Patty responded, "I think that if I am not doing something, then I am wasting time. If I am wasting time, then something will happen that I will miss out on and because I feel like I have to have control over my life; missing out is intolerable." We looked more closely at her feelings and began to explore the impact on her of John's asking her to wait. Patty described her fear of losing John and her sense that the only way she could hold on to him was by moving forward in marriage. John heard this and was able to see that his waiting took on a life of its own. He recognized that she was unable to consider his timing, his need to process. Patty and John did learn over time to respect the need to wait while they respected each other's perspective. As they began to share over the weeks and months the assumptions and fears that permeated the relationship, they found a clearer way to navigate the waiting and moved confidently towards marriage.

## CHAPTER 2

# CONNECTION: CONTACT and TOUCH

**C**onnection. Connection: “A relationship in which a person, thing, or idea is associated with something else.” Such a simple concept but a very complex and often complicated act. How do we get there? I realize that there are no hard and fast rules for how a person connects. In fact, the plethora of ways that we do connect in our relationships proves that connection is a personal and, more often than not, a moving and flexible experience. The nature and quality of the act of connecting with someone you meet is highly variable, whether this is a stranger or someone you have known for a long time. On some occasions, I have gone to meet someone and found that before the actual connection is made, the contact with either the hand shake or hug, or simply the way the person looks at me, registers in the brain as likely to be safe or dangerous, toxic, or healthy. There’s a complex layering of perception, expectation, and gut reaction within seconds of meeting. Then I have to ask myself, is my perception clear, or have my own fears changed my reception of the signals coming from the other person, and so changed the possibility of connecting? How does this happen? Our brains are wired to seek relationship and size up an interpersonal situation in seconds.



## *The brain basis for connection: mirror neurons*

When I was in social work school I came across advances in neuroscience drawn from studies of activity in the brains of monkeys conducted in 2009 by Gallese, an Italian scientist in his lab in Parma. When one monkey sees another monkey making a physical action, the neurons in the corresponding part of the brain of the observing monkey are activated, even though the observing monkey is not copying the action. The observing monkey's brain is sharing the physical experience of the other monkey! This happens through the action of multiple signals from what are called the *mirror neurons*. It is harder for science to prove the transmission of feelings or thoughts, but it certainly seems likely that there are mirror neurons at work helping us to feel another person's pain, share their joy, or size up their reactions. And mirror neurons are activating my mind to sense what my partner is feeling and intending.

This is the brain science behind the complex art of connection. Knowing that science can orient our mind to the other we are connecting to. In 2004, another scientist, Kenneth Laws who is a physicist and trained dancer, wrote *The Physics of Dance* to share his knowledge of physics as it informs our body about the mechanisms of balance and movement. But on the dance floor, we can also rely on a set of simple instructions for creating connection through five points of contact. It gets a lot more complicated after that, but at least this gives us a beginning, a way to approach the other person's body to arrive at a secure hold.

## *The body basis for connection*

### *5 points of contact for the couple's dance position*

- 1) The man's left and the woman's right hand touch, her fingers folding gently over the man's palm.

- 2) The man's right lower forearm connects under the woman's left upper arm near her armpit
- 3) The man's right hand reaches to gently touch the woman's left shoulder blade.
- 4) The woman's left forearm and hand rest on the man's arm, her thumb and third finger gently cupping his biceps.
- 5) The right side of the lower rib cages of each partner connect.

Now let's look at making contact and getting into the hold position. As we saw in Chapter 1, you wait until your partner is ready. He will hold out his left hand, the signal for you to approach. You fit your right hand to his and he clasps it. You move your right side to his left side and your bodies connect along the lower rib cage, trunk and hip. He puts his right arm around your left shoulder, his hand on your shoulder blade. You place your left forearm along his upper right arm, connecting the lower part of your arm near to the elbow to the lower part of his upper arm, and your wrist to his upper arm. Be sure to keep your left shoulder back in his hand, because that will keep you supported on your own standing foot and keeps you in place in your own space. Your heads are counterbalanced looking away from each other, allowing plenty of space in the topline. What I have described is the basic connection for all ballroom dances when in the closed position, except that in tango the woman's arm rests behind and under the man's right upper arm and in Latin dances it reaches higher up toward the shoulder and sometimes slips around the back when in open position. A strong frame is a firm frame that provides connection and conveys intended movement which proceeds straight ahead, in reverse, turning, or spinning; the bodies may rise or fall, swing or sway in perfect balance, according to the principles of aesthetics and the physics of momentum.



*The Frame*

Max Sinita and Sophia d'Angelo

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*Connecting lightly and independently, relaxed yet toned muscles*

Going into this a little deeper, we have to consider a paradox. As a woman dancer I want to seem as light as a butterfly resting lightly on the arm of my partner, yet I need a slight tension in my upper arms. I

need to have tone in my muscles that offer some resistance to forward movement while waiting until each moment that I receive my direction. I need core strength and foot power. I hold my arms and upper body firmly in place without relying on him or applying any force, and he does the same for himself. I need to be in equilibrium, conscious of my center point of balance at the level of my navel (his will be at the level of his solar plexus). I do not rely on him for support: I am responsible for myself, but together, each from our own point of balance, we maintain connection and control the movement that will follow, according to the principles of physics and aesthetics. I want to be ready to go where and when he directs me to move, but to do that well I have to be able to wait. So there I am in position, connected, relaxed, ready, and waiting to respond.

I'm going into this in some detail because the "hold" provides the frame for everything that follows. Similarly, in therapy we provide a frame for the treatment. True, the therapy setting doesn't involve full body connection like that, except in fantasy. Patients may long for a more affectionate relationship with the therapist as a kind of parent of a young child. In fact that is the whole point of a therapist's physical restraint: It brings out the patients' ancient longings for us to work on in therapy so that these longings can be expressed within the couple in words and in intimate interaction in the privacy of their own home. As in dance, we attend to the frame and use established conventions to provide a safe psychological space to enter into.

Returning to the dance floor, Melissa our coach describes connection simply as a light touch. Apparently my connection is too strong. Not something new to me. I am working so hard on how to connect with someone that I am overdoing it. I want to connect securely, but not to be too strong or overbearing. Melissa suggests that I am often ahead of my partner, Nik. That I move without his telling me where to go, not even waiting for him to invite me to move. I need to be able to wait to be invited. But the little girl in me does not trust that I will be invited or that if I am invited perhaps it wasn't really

meant, or even worse that I really am invited and so I engage and attach, but then I am left. These are not small concerns. They are huge barriers to healthy connection.

*Lew and Mary: Not connecting sexually*

In the treatment room we see the same frame issues in the parallel universe of everyday coupling. Lew and Mary initially came to see me because they were having difficulty in their intimacy and their sex life. Mary came from a traditional home where sex was not talked about. Lew came from a home where his parents were very open about their own intimacy and at times a bit intrusive. Lew recounted many times where he felt unusually uncomfortable around his parents when they would kiss. He remembers many times when their bedroom door was locked and his curiosity was piqued and led to fear and fantasy about what was happening in there. Mary, on the other hand, had never seen her parents kiss or even hold hands. Her parents gave each other love and attention through words and “a pat on the back” as she described it.

Mary was quite anxious about sharing her concerns with Lew and felt she needed to have a third party to help her. She shared her worry and concern that Lew’s behavior in the bedroom was “aggressive.” Lew met this with complete shock. He felt that in no way was he aggressive. Mary gave examples of his “aggressive” sexual behavior and Lew denied them adamantly. As I listened to them discuss their sexual life as a couple, I found myself using my knowledge of ballroom connection to understand this couple’s romantic connection.

When dancing there are times when I feel pulled in a particular direction, pulled off my feet, or pushed to move. I often express concern with my partner when this is happening. My complaint is met with his suggestion that I am off time, and he needs to move us as a couple, for example, and I need to adjust and follow. I tend to sense his strength and his desire to move me or to shape me as aggressive, and boundary-breaking. But is this really an aggressive act? In making these moves he breaks my boundary but he makes the moves in order

to build the frame of the couple as a unified front. He and I are both subordinate to that goal.

I listened to Mary and Lew in a different way. I was able to show them that the boundary in the couple was broken but that each had a responsibility to the other to be present, to be giving, to listen to each other's body, and to either stop and re-focus or move forward with consent. I suggested to Mary that in those moments that she felt that Lew was being strong or aggressive that she ask to stop, give herself time to understand, and give Lew time to interpret what she needed. I asked Lew to be aware of his positioning, his internal desires, and how they might come across. Each had to look outside their comfort zone and be able to find again the timing of their bodies in interaction, using the connection of their minds.

### *The influence of early relationships*

People interact and react based on a multitude of reasons. The major influence on our interactions is our early relationship with our caregivers, mainly our parents. Those first interactions between us and them, our personality and their loving provision of care, construct a secure base and create attachment, as John Bowlby described it years ago. Within those early attachments we have myriad experiences of waiting, following, separating, becoming aware of ourselves and learning how to behave in a relationship. Ronald Fairbairn, the Scottish psychoanalyst, explained that our individual personality is built out of experiences that we take in to ourselves during those early relationships, and we continue to modify it in future relationships with peers, teachers, neighbors, relatives, and intimate partners. It is like a script written into our mind and body and we are bound to produce it in our current thoughts, feelings, movements, and interactions, partly because it is what we know, and partly because we put ourselves out there in order to learn from experience, change and grow. The American psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas puts it a little differently.

He says that our first aesthetic is our experience of our mother's way of caring for us in infancy in such a way that we are transformed by what is happening to our body and our mind in that earliest partnership. From then on we search for experiences that recall those early moments of bliss, looking for new aesthetic experience that will be transformational.

I connect this to my childhood fantasy. It was a powerful motivator. But I became the ballroom dancer from early training in individual dance, and from many iterations of ballroom dance teachers, and current partners. I learned from all of them, and now I know which partners I will work best with. With them I continue to evolve in my ability to both express myself and contribute to our frame. Similarly in a marriage, spouses will grow in the loving context of a secure relationship from which they benefit and to which they contribute.

### *What brings you to therapy?*

Often my usual opening comment or question to a new couple is "What brings you here today?" My hope is to open up the floor for anyone to start. I look to see the patterns that arise in the couple. I notice who starts, which of them has brought the couple to the therapist, why they are here, what they need from me, and how they interact. I will often ask how the couple argues. How do they manage anger or hurt? Although working with couples is a dynamic process, meaning that I am and become part of the couple and am able to see in real time the ways in which a couple argue or become angry with one another, I also like to hear what their perception is of the conflicts and how they try to cope.

### *Peter and Ann: Connecting by fighting*

Peter and Ann found themselves arguing continuously, and this frightened them. It created concern that perhaps they were too

different and not meant to be together. They were in search of ways to have their differences without escalating arguments, and they wanted the matter settled right away. In their conflicts, Ann would often interrupt Peter. As she continued to interrupt, Peter would become quiet and evasive. This particular type of interaction only served to increase Ann's anxiety and led to the assumption that Peter did not care or that he was not listening. The fight would escalate with Ann raising her voice and often storming out of the room. I asked Peter if this was usual and he agreed that she did act impulsively like that, and had tried to hit him on occasion. She loved him so why would she hit him?

Was Ann, like me on the dance floor, uncertain that her partner would be able to manage her, to guide her, to protect her and to be there for her? Is that why Ann created an argument to deflect her anxiety so as to NOT find out what she worried most about? She was using arguing as her way of connecting, while being too afraid to connect otherwise, and then she never had to face the deepest fear of all. What do we do when we connect? What if we connect, and the connection doesn't work and we lose our couple relationship.

### *Tim and Nancy: Miscommunication, missed connection*

When I began working with couples in therapy I noticed over the course of their work with me that the words they spoke attempting to get through to each other were baffling, confusing or torturous. This was particularly evident in one couple, Tim and Nancy for whom even the most mundane conversations became filled with anticipation, trepidation and pain. Their miscommunications were readily available for anyone to pick up and clear up, but not to them. Tim and Nancy reacted as if speaking a different language. I often would catch something that was said, and in my role as observer was no more taken aback than if I had been asked to pass the salt. Nonetheless, a simple comment, perhaps something as easy as, should we eat dinner in or go out, could have the ripple effect of a tremor before an earthquake. The



glances, the body language, and the aura in the room could be as palpable as a cold wind suddenly blowing in from the north.

In Standard dancing, once the man reaches his hand out and the woman has a clear sign that he is ready, he holds his frame steady and offers her his hand. He allows her a moment to find her way inside his frame, organize herself as her right hand clasps his left, and her left arm rests on his right arm, her right side to his left side (but not exactly since she is placed a little to his right), and their connection is made.

Thinking about this moment in Standard dancing brought me to this question for the couple: What might it be like for Tim and Nancy to sit in the treatment room in total silence and for each of them to reach out their hand and just hold hands for fifteen minutes? This would be a new way of connecting without argumentative words. The option would be to look at each other or not. They were not to create any rules around the hand holding. One could hold the other's hand in any way they wanted to without hurting the other physically. But the pressure or lack of pressure, the tenderness or lack thereof, the tentativeness or the sureness would all be noted as communications of the essence of the holder and the receiver, all of which goes beyond words.

What I noticed in the consecutive weeks of treatment with Tim and Nancy was that this hand holding for the first fifteen minutes of the session had a salutary effect. This couple—each misunderstanding the other, each projecting their thoughts and feelings on to the other, each holding hurt from other relationships including parental hurt—now entering a period of quiet, simply holding hands, became more responsive and appreciative of the other's presence. From there, when it was safe to re-introduce words, they could listen from a more settled place. It was quite a transformation, at least for the present.



*Attunement without Words*

Max Sinitsa and Tatiana Seliverstova

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In the world of dance, I have explained how the connection is made using hands, arms, and torso and how essential it is to maintain a strong frame. Maintaining that connection while moving across space and over time is the hard part. It takes concentration, stamina, and training. The same holds true for the couple in treatment. Many iterations of metaphorical hand-holding, and talking in therapy about their experiences, are needed before the miscommunicating partners become a clearly responsive and consistently contemplative couple.

CHAPTER 3  
**BEING LED**

*Aliza: The powerful fantasy of a loving embrace*

**E**arly on in my psychotherapy practice I worked with a young girl in a psychiatric hospital. Aliza was found unconscious one morning before school after having taken her mother's sleeping pills the night before. She had been struggling with debilitating depression for several years and finally came to this desperate and painful place. I was called in to meet with Aliza. What happened in our first session together will always stay with me. Aliza was an adopted child who had spent her first five years in an orphanage with insufficient holding and handling. Instead of one loving mother she had rotating child minders. Aliza had very little memory of those years but could recall her bedtime ritual. She would close her eyes and rock herself to sleep. She said, "I imagined the prince in *The Sleeping Beauty*. He didn't have much to say but he would see me from across the room and offer his hand to me to dance. We would dance as if we were floating, with ease, and I could feel the warm touch of this hand. The dream or fantasy would end there as I would fall fast asleep but just as I was about to sleep his parting words to me were, 'I love you.' Nothing else, nothing more. And off to sleep I would go, knowing that

someone loved me and that he was there to guide me.” Eliza had created a dream of being invited by someone into an embrace and being held in their arms. She remembers the warmth of that feeling and continued to use that fantasy as a strategy to fall asleep. Aliza was eventually adopted, but continued to hold on to both the experience of deep loneliness and fear from her time in the orphanage and the comforting fantasy of the man holding and rocking her. The human connection was what she needed and desired. I connected to her through knowing the power of that fantasy. I had stepped into her life at a moment of crisis. I held out a metaphorical hand to her, and as we explored her fantasy further in therapy, she began to realize that it was the absence of touch that had forced her to create the fantasy. Now when she has the fantasy it reminds her of what was lacking. She knows that she needs connection and looks for a sign that it is there.

### *The strong lead: Feeling safe “in his hand”*

I thought of this during a lesson with my partner when he held out his hand for me. He said, “I will invite you into my frame. Then my hand, or my lead, will let you know when to go or when to stop or how fast or how slow I want you to turn.” I was returned to my moments with Aliza. How she longed for such a welcome, sure touch, and guidance from a devoted figure, and how present was the absence of that safety.

### *The weighted connection*

How safe I felt with this partner, and wanted to be guided or led around by him. Yet, one of the greatest ironies is that often I cannot feel his lead or understand that I need to be “IN HIS HAND” as they say. To be in his hand requires that the upper part of my back under the shoulder be given to him so that he can feel the weight of me and use that to guide me. Otherwise I am free standing and essentially dancing on my own. It’s possibly the most critical piece to dancing with a

partner. It's the weighted connection. That thing that Aliza longed for. The feeling of connection is very powerful. Another woman may feel more longing for connection with a woman as the lead. A man may feel that same preference for connection with a male lead. The man in the lead is a convention of the ballroom, and the word "man" provides a kind of shorthand for referring to the lead.

Amateur dancers often lament that it is sometimes difficult to feel that connection, that lead. How difficult it is to know where to find the exactly right physical connection so that the man (or the lead) can guide you. Why? It means that you have to put your hope and trust in another person's intentions. In him. I marvel at how simple it is. I am aware of what the lead is offering me and yet, it can be one of the most elusive offers to accept. It is daunting to allow yourself to be led, to find the right fit between two bodies, to listen and feel the guide.

What do we do when we do get what we want? How do we feel when we get a good, strong lead that is just right? What do we do with the touch and the connection? Is there something about the on-and-off of the touch that might feel too abrupt, too painful, a reminder of a loss? Or is the gain so important that losing it again is too difficult? Is it too hard to fathom the notion of handing oneself over—or is that ecstasy? Was Aliza struggling with handing herself over to the family which now gives her connection?

## *Boundaries*

And so we look at our couple relationship. What are the boundaries in our relationship? Our skin is a boundary so that we are not too porous but at times I think I can feel as if my husband goes beyond that or that I am the one to want that break in the boundary to happen. Are we able to lean in and give ourselves over to our husband, wife, or significant other? To trust that they will guide us when we need it and also to let us stand on our own when we need it?

## *Not trusting the good lead*

I was sitting with my friend who was struggling with the recent separation from her husband of twenty-six years. She was distraught, traumatized and working through the inevitable questions of “What did I do wrong?” “What must I have missed?” “Was there something I could have done?” “What does this say about me?” We talked at length about the enormous upheaval, the myriad doubts and questions of who she was and who she thought he was. How was she to manage the panic of the loss and the potential loneliness?

She was not the first to come to me in that situation. I have spent countless hours consoling friends, listening to clients, reading and studying the effects of separation and the consequences of divorce. The precursors run the gamut: One member of the couple having an affair, the other feeling lost and misunderstood; the partners gradually growing apart; unanticipated rejection for no apparent reason; and various iterations of rejection, betrayal and loss. But it all comes down to the questions: “Who am I now and who was I then? Why did it fail?”

On this particular morning my friend and I were heading out to our individual practice sessions and each of our dance teachers. I asked her to think a bit about the connection or the relationship she has with her partner in dancing and the ways in which it might mirror her relationship with her husband. As I asked the question, I could see a look of recognition and surprise. I’m not certain that she had seen the direct correlation but as she began to think she said, “I often do not wait for my teacher to lead me. I am already a step ahead and therefore he can’t lead me to the next step.” I asked her why she thought she might do that. Her response was significant in helping her at least see the correlation. She said, “I don’t really trust that he will be there and I want to make sure it gets done, so I assume if I do that step it will be done, and the anxiety is less.”

I told her that I too have that problem on occasion. When I spoke to Max about it, he helped me understand why it is so critical to wait

for his lead. He replied, “If I cannot lead you, then 1) you will always be ahead of me and that means we are not dancing together; and 2) you render me useless because you prevent me from doing my task which is to keep us on time and to direct you to the location I need you to go to.” It seemed so simple and yet so hard. Neither one of us had any reason to believe that our teachers/partners wouldn’t be there for us. We had absolutely no evidence or past experience with them not being there at every turn or every step. But what would make us feel that distrust?

I asked my friend whether this insight could give her information about her love relationship. She replied that she knew that her husband was not going to be there for her in many ways, so her go-to was to do things on her own, and as time pushed on it became a habit. But this habit essentially rendered her husband useless, and he has learned to be helpless.

Although most people feel the need and desire to be coupled, we may end up feeling alone. The length we will go to so as to fend off the possibility of being disappointed actually excludes the partner from the important work of being there for the other. It is in that way we collude in sabotaging our couple relationship.

### *The Weak Lead: Feeling anxious and off balance*

When I work with a couple I am infinitely aware of their dance. The specific way they speak to each other, their tone of voice and their responses, their inflections and their eye contact, their touch and their avoidance of touch— all are specific to that couple. Two unique individuals come together, and the couple that they form has a rhythm, a tenor, a unique personality. In the healthy couple, each of the partners leads and the other follows in various areas, depending on their strengths and weaknesses.

In ballroom dance, however, the convention is that the man is the leader and the woman is the follower. That doesn’t mean she follows



blindly. She wants a strong lead to follow; otherwise she is lost. Can you imagine walking up to a heavy door, exerting the necessary force to push it open, only to find it is made of Styrofoam? You fall off balance. This is what it is like to have a partner with a weak lead.



*Waiting for the Lead*

Nikolai Pilipenchuk and Sophia d'Angelo

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Early in my ballroom dance training I was told to go to as many social dancing venues as possible to learn what it feels like to dance with various amateur dancers, men who are not trained to lead like a professional. I do think that social dancing with a partner is key to really understanding how to dance. It requires us to listen very closely to the person who invites us to dance, an unknown person, and to sense how he leads, and respond to that sort of lead. There is nothing choreographed, and no time to get to know him, much less practice. Eye contact, body connection, feet and hips in sync, all must come

together on a dime. On one occasion, as I am apt to do, I was salsa dancing. I was danced with several partners that evening. Some of the men who were new to salsa had no lead at all. As I stepped onto the floor with one man, waiting to be moved, there was absolutely no direction! My anxiety increased, his increased as well, and we were completely out of step. The music was no longer part of our experience because we were so lacking in rhythm and timing. The dance ended shortly thereafter, and I walked away feeling incapable and unmoved. He, I assume, walked away disappointed in himself, me as his partner, and the unsatisfactory experience he just had.

*Sheila and Patrick: The lead that is too strong*

Sheila and Patrick were a couple in crisis when they first came to see me. Sheila called and was upset on the phone, almost inaudible. Her voice was no more than a whisper as she asked me if she and her fiancé could come in today. It is not often that I could find time on the day that someone calls; so I asked if it could wait until the following day. When I arrived at my office the next morning both Sheila and Patrick were already in my waiting room. I took this as a clear sign of distress.

Patrick entered my office first and sat in my chair. I noted that this was actually the very first time that anyone assumed that my chair was a chair to be used and that the two other chairs that look like pairs are for the couple. Nonetheless, Patrick sat in my chair. I explained that the other two chairs were for my clients and asked him if he could please sit in one of them. I was taken aback when I noticed that, in fact, he moved out of my chair with great reluctance. As I often do, I asked what brought them to see me. Sheila sat very quietly while Patrick led the conversation. He began by sharing that Sheila seemed to think that he was drinking too much and that she said that when he has a glass of wine he becomes mean. He stated that he felt that, in fact, it was Sheila who was drinking too much. I noticed that as he was describing how they met and why she feels he is mean he began to increase his volume and engage with me as if I had been accusing him.

I often use myself as a tool in the room when I work with couples. I listen to what I am feeling and what I am seeing. I take notice of this because it gives me a clue as to what it feels like for either of them in the relationship. A couple's therapist is drawn into the dynamic of the couple relationship and experiences it from the inside. With this couple, I felt a forcefulness and strength from Patrick that were overwhelming. There were even moments that I was not certain that Patrick was going to stay in his assigned "client chair." In contrast, Sheila shared very little during this session. I saw the dynamics of a couple where one is too strong a lead while the other being led feels dragged. Sheila and Patrick would have many months of work ahead of them in couple therapy. But they were not to have a happy ending, given that Patrick remained unable to see the effect of his overbearing nature and Sheila could not stand on her own feet and describe how very difficult it was for her to be in a partnership like this one.

I thought about my moments when I have danced with partners whose lead was too strong. As the student, I have been told that the teacher or partner needed to lead me that way because otherwise we would be off time or we wouldn't be in step. Although that may be very true, it is uncomfortable to feel dragged or pushed or coerced or led too strongly. What role do we have in that and what do we do about it? In the case of the partnership on the floor, I have learned to ask what it was about my movement that caused this force. I give it a name, and I say that what it feels like for me. At that moment I take the lead in addressing and fixing the problem in the dance partnership. Which takes me to an important point of difference: In the ballroom the convention is that the man leads; in life, the woman may be the acknowledged leader of the couple. And in the healthy couple, man and woman take turns leading and following according to their strengths and preferences, relating with empathy and respect, as they work together to create a functional, intimate couple relationship.

### *Mandy and Tina: The overpowering lead*

Mandy and Tina, both in their early thirties, were referred to me by an addictions counselor. Mandy was a recovering alcoholic and Tina a recovering drug addict. While spending two years in a hospital setting during internship before graduating I had found working with addictions very challenging. But having a family member who is a recovering addict, now 25 years clean, I also found it hopeful, and moving. So I accepted this case as their couple therapist, not their addictions therapist. Our boundaries needed to be clearly set from the start. Mandy, who knew Tina's schedule as well, was the one who called me, and decided when we would meet. She was clearly the leader of that couple.

Mandy and Tina presented as a thoughtful and intuitive couple. Our first visit, as often is the case, is a time for each member of the couple to share their thoughts and feelings about why they are coming to see me; and it is my time to connect with them as a couple and create the beginnings of a therapeutic relationship. The process of creating a bond and a trusting relationship can take quite a while depending on the couple. Mandy and Tina seemed open and willing to share their concerns and their intimate details within the first session. They described themselves as sexually fluid, and yet they were both committed to making this relationship work. However, Mandy felt that Tina was no longer interested in being intimate. Mandy felt that they began this relationship with a very strong bond and a very healthy sex life, but now she was frustrated. For the first 30 minutes of the 50 minute session, Mandy went into great detail about their relationship to sex. She explained the ways in which they had sex, how many times they had sex, and how Tina always used to be highly attracted to Mandy. As Mandy was talking, I noticed that Tina no longer kept eye contact with me or with Mandy. It appeared as if she was slowly melting in to her chair. I asked Tina if, in fact, this conversation, and what was being shared, was making her feel uncomfortable. And as I did, Mandy interrupted and told me that, in

fact, Tina was not uncomfortable and that my asking that question was ridiculous. I felt reprimanded, invalidated and squashed. I felt that Mandy wanted to manage both of us, and from inside my experience, I got a sense of how controlling she was.

As I mentioned earlier, the couple therapist becomes part of the process. We use our own experience to understand what it feels like for each person in the couple. It is completely normal for a client to be angry or annoyed or to share any and all feelings they have towards the therapist. And the therapist works with that feeling, and looks for its resonance in the couple. The therapist also looks to see how the couple reacts to what she says. My question triggered something in Mandy. I asked Tina if she would be willing to talk about this reaction of looking away while we were having this conversation. Tina attempted to answer, but Mandy once again interrupted, certain that Tina and she had a very intimate and “great” sex life. Tina, once again, appeared to look away.

I noted this, and decided to move away from this difficult moment and connect the dots to their early life. Mandy and Tina had very similar backgrounds. Mandy was an only child, as was Tina. Mandy’s father had died when she was two years old and her mother was a recovering addict. Similarly, Tina lived alone with her mother as her father was an alcoholic and was later incarcerated for stabbing a man who he said was robbing him. Both mothers had worked long hours, and Mandy and Tina were latch-key kids. The similarity in their backgrounds made them feel that they understood each other and that their relationship was a match that was meant to be. The session ended, and we decided that we would then meet the next day to continue.

Mandy and Tina arrived early for their next session, Tina leading the way in to my office this time. Tina appeared to have been crying recently. The session began with Tina sharing a recent episode of what she referred to as “sexual foul play.” She explained that both of them were interested in “kinky sex” with Mandy as the Dom (dominant

partner) and Tina the Sub (submissive partner). Lately, however, it was becoming much too rough for Tina. She was worried that, perhaps, Mandy was too strong for her, and that she would have no way to stop her once “things” got started. Tina was very sorry to have to share this, but she had to because she felt frightened at times. This explained her lack of interest in sex.

While working as their couple therapist, I was also pursuing my dance training. I was studying with a teacher who was too forceful both in his directions towards me and in his style of dance. I had chosen this teacher because I felt he had a powerful sense of self, a strong work ethic, and an electric personality on the floor. But once we started work together, I saw the darker side of him. It felt as if there was a part of him that would go too far, and I would feel pushed or forced rather than directed and given agency over myself. As I struggled with this relationship in the ballroom, I realized the similarities to the couple of Mandy and Tina. Tina and I had been asking for something but once we had it, we could not be sure that it was, in fact, what was needed. The question we both faced was how to hold on to our self and take back the lead. What could we do to realign ourselves, she in her intimate life and I in my dance partnership? Is it fair to ask someone to change when that is what we looked for initially? And what if one partner changes? Partners can become more of who they are, so to speak, than expected. Often, what we fall in love with or gravitate towards is the thing that creates a relationship, and then is the very thing that leads to its demise. What we saw as interesting becomes something untenable. In my situation with this dance teacher, I began to see that I had lost my voice. If I spoke up it would be met with confusion, defensiveness and arguments.

Was this what was happening to Mandy and Tina? How could they draw on their shared histories to unite again, and improve their communication styles to allow for safety and equality in their desires for sex? Our work together consisted of practicing the use of “I”

statements, giving feedback as things were happening before the feelings festered, sharing feelings, and becoming aware of how domineering behavior can trigger a feeling of being overwhelmed and losing control. They practiced roleplays in which each of them was able, by switching their roles as dominant and submissive in other parts of their life, to understand the impact each had on the other. This was not to change their sexual preferences for dominance and submission, but to create sensitivity to the experience of the other and foster a collaborative approach to sexual satisfaction.

Not unlike Mandy and Tina, I, too, needed to find a balance in my lead and follow working with my Latin style teacher and partner, Nikolai. I recently had a practice session with Nikolai where I explained to him that I thought I would like less of a strong lead. Not that he is domineering at all. It was just that I felt that if he would just let me go on my own with a mere “suggestion” of where I needed to be, that I would get there, and I wouldn’t feel as if he was overpowering me. He very sweetly smiled and said. “Well, okay, let’s try that. I could give you just a “suggestion” of a lead.” And he chuckled. He knew that it would not work! But the point is that I had spoken up and he had listened to me. I could say this to him, and he could think about it without getting defensive, and he let me try it my way. And that is when I learned about the importance of the lead. And I no longer found it to be too strong. It had become just right.

I believe that the work I do with couples is all about communication and helping the couple negotiate and find a connection in which they feel that what they have is good enough. Mandy faced the task of being not too strong, and Tina had to learn to be not so weak— in sex and in communication— and then the couple could find what was just right. I do not work with the idea that there is one way to be, or that partners need to subscribe to any particular notion of what makes a successful couple. How does that couple define what is just right for them? Can each feel that the other is strong

enough to lead but willing to follow if need be? And when one falls off balance, they will get back to equilibrium.

*Suzanne and Robert: The lost lead*

Suzanne and Robert had been married for twenty-five years and had four children. Robert was an accomplished lawyer and Suzanne was a stay-at-home mother. Suzanne had spent the last twenty years of the marriage running the household and managing all the children's affairs while Robert worked late hours and traveled extensively for his job. Each one had a known role in the partnership, and each took on their responsibilities with pride. Within the past year, the last child had left for college. It was now time for Robert and Suzanne to explore all that was left on their to-do list. However, they found themselves at odds with each other most of the time, arguments were escalating, and the marriage was about to dissolve.

Robert explained that once the children left Suzanne no longer filled her usual role of taking care of the areas of life that he needed help with. With the children gone, she didn't have dinner ready when he arrived home from work and she was not a loving partner. He felt as if he was last on her list, no longer felt important in her eyes. Suzanne looked distraught and deflated. When I turned to ask her how she felt about what Robert was saying, Suzanne said, "I thought that I was being a loving partner but I have spent much of my life caring for the children, I didn't want to be in charge of taking care of Robert that way as well. I thought we were a team now, and I thought that there would be time to focus on me, not the household. Robert said he felt lost without Suzanne "at the helm" of the ship. Her caretaking had helped him feel grounded and so without her "running the house and the kids" he felt like a ship unmoored without a captain.

As I listened to Robert, I connected to his feeling of lacking a lead and to her wish to be in a team of two. At the salsa dance I too had been left to fend for myself in what was expected to be a partnered experience. I felt so deflated by the experience that I felt that all I could



do was walk away. Unlike my salsa dance partner, Suzanne could give a strong lead, but she didn't want to have to lead anymore; Robert needed her guidance and care and without it he felt rejected and unloved. Do they walk away, as my partner and I did, and simply manage the disappointment and move on to the next person? How was I to use this to help this couple, each one having a valid feeling, to NOT walk away? I then imagined what might have happened if I had returned to that same dance partner later and asked if we should try again but this time slow down and even just do a few basic steps while giving him time to find his way to lead me and my being patient enough to let him lead and change my expectations.

I returned to my session with Robert and Suzanne later in the week. I said they appeared to have lost hope in their relationship, now that their lives were understandably changed without their children at home. I asked if they could walk it back, take another look at what was the necessary "lead" at this stage in life. Often couples have the feeling that what worked for them in the first twenty-five years should work now. But many things have changed— health, job satisfaction, desire for travel, missing the energy of growing children, caring for aging parents, changing sex drives —and so it can't. Then disappointment fuels discouragement and estrangement. But flexibility and an open mind can allow each person to become something else and together develop a new vision of their couple hood. I often think that the challenge can bring new energy into the couple and move them to a new balance in leading and following. There is no promise that the new adjustment will stand the test of time, but it can breathe life back in to the couple.

As you will have gathered by now, in a dance couple, the successful combination of lead and follow is the core tenet of dancing together successfully. The lead that is too strong leaves the follower feeling helpless and unstable. In contrast, the weak lead can throw the follower off their feet, and create instability as well. The lead that is just right keeps the couple in unison.

## CHAPTER 4

# COMMUNICATION

**T**he art of communication in our couple relationship on the dance floor can be as complicated and daunting as the art of communication in our couple relationship at home.

### *Verbal communication: “I” statements*

Many years ago I went for an Imago retreat with my husband. That is a two-day intensive marriage restoration program for couples. We had three small children all two years apart and a house that was filled with activities. My husband’s career was taking off, and the hours spent engaged in that were numerous. At the same time we were committed to having dinner on the table at six o’clock so that our family had a gathering spot and a place to unfold and share about our day. Our commitment to our children and our family was stronger than anything else in our life. Nonetheless, as with many young couples engaged in the daunting exercise of building a life together, becoming a family, with or without children, the drive to succeed and to make ends meet can take its toll on a relationship. Where we lost our connection was in our communication.

While at this retreat, my husband and I learned the art of using “I” statements. We had been searching for ways to engage and were both

feeling at a loss. How could we get our point across and our needs met? The leaders had us write down all the things that we wanted from the other and then individually ask for them without interruption. However, this time we were asked to use only “I” statements. The idea was that I could speak to my husband by owning what was mine, instead of blaming him for not meeting my needs or making me feel upset. I was to say simply, “When you do this, I feel that.” This was a new and powerful exercise for us. It allowed us both to feel empowered.

That is one form of intervention conducted in words. I could say it lends itself nicely to a revision of communication. It helps get past the noise in our heads, the traumas from our past, and the stubborn interference of our closely held beliefs, which surround us in our everyday relationships.

### *Verbal miscommunication*

When I began working with couples in therapy, I noticed, over the course of their work with me, that what they found most confusing and destructive were the words that were said to each other. Often it was as if they were speaking a different language. At times, as the observer, I would catch something that was said from one person to the other, which may be quite innocuous but would illicit a strong and, at times, combative response. What was said was an attempt at contact, at communicating something that had great meaning to the other, at repairing a fault in their connection. But the result was a miscommunication that created anxiety which then sabotaged their ability to wait for each other to clarify and understand. The communication became hurried and reactive. The miscommunication came from their rush to judgement. And that takes us back to Chapter One where I spoke about developing the ability to wait in order to connect.

### *Daniel and Alex: Communicating through the hands*

Daniel and Alex communicated their complaints and wishes in a plethora of hurried responses. I transferred my thinking about them as a couple talking in a treatment room to communicating physically in the ballroom. I thought of the moments when I waited for Max or Nikolai to reach out their hand to me. I thought of the moments of standing on deck waiting to go on the floor to compete. We are standing quietly no longer talking to each other. Moments before I walk out on to the competition floor, I often notice that my hands are cold and clammy. My partner's hands are warm and steady. His steady hand communicates to me a calmness, and we walk together to the floor. The hands at this point are our only means of knowing where to go, when to stop, and find our position on the floor. There is either a pressure, or lack of pressure, tenderness or boldness, tentativeness or certainty, in the touch of the leader and the follower.

As our next session approached I asked my couple, Daniel and Alex, if they would be willing to experiment with me in my ideas about verbal communication and the myriad ways it can be detrimental to a couple's intimacy. I shared my thoughts about the value of hand-holding, and they agreed to work with me in this particular session without using words. Instead they would simply hold hands and wait for the other to pass along their communication through their hands. What I noticed was riveting to me, and it created massive change for this couple.

The experiment began with the request that they not speak to each other for the first fifteen minutes of the session, that they walk in, take their seats and begin the session by reaching out and taking the other's hand. On this occasion, it was Daniel who reached for Alex. We sat in silence for the first fifteen minutes as I waited. When the time was up, I asked them to share their thoughts and any feelings that came up.

Daniel shared this: “At first I was really nervous to reach out and hold Alex’s hand. I wasn’t sure what response I would get. I had so many thoughts running through my head. Some of the thoughts were loving and some of them were rejecting. I think I got stuck on the rejecting thoughts and then started to feel angry at him. I could hear Alex saying things to me that felt hurtful but then I realized that he hadn’t said a word yet, and I remembered that you asked us to just pay attention to what comes up and what we feel. I sort of felt him reach back and give a small squeeze. I took that as he wanted to be close to me, so that calmed me down. And I stayed holding his hand. Then I felt his hand was getting hot and a bit clammy. I wondered why he was nervous and I took that as maybe it’s because he doesn’t like holding my hand. I then retreated again. But soon after I felt both of us relax and I felt warm inside. I felt his softness and something about him that felt vulnerable to me. I’m not saying it was easy in any way, but I did see how much my interpretation of what he means is inside of me and that I probably change what he is saying to me to fit what is in my fantasy.”

Alex shared: “When Daniel reached for my hand I immediately got nervous. I thought of all the expectations. Should I hold him softly or firmly, should I reach back instantly, or should I wait? I could feel him getting sweaty, and then I thought that maybe I was making him nervous. I wondered what I do to him to make him so anxious. And then I thought that maybe if I just waited, like you suggested, than maybe I could learn something new about us. And in a way, I did learn something about him. That his hand feels safe to me and that I care a lot for Daniel. I want to keep experimenting with hand-holding. I’m thinking that it also tells me a lot about my fears.”

Our sessions continued for many months with the start of the session just holding hands. Daniel and Alex learned quite a bit about their attachment styles, their communication styles, and their sexual desires for each other. They learned, over time, to wait for

the other to give a signal and to be patient with the other to work through the communication from their brain to their hands.

I, too, have learned a great deal from the moments when my dance partner and I hold hands. I have learned the art of receiving information and giving information through my hands. I have learned through waiting for him to reach for me, that it is not about my being called forth and obeying a command, but instead it is our first moment to connect as a couple, and that we both choose that moment. Often I am a few seconds behind as he extends his hand to call me over, and in that communication I feel my own strength now. I see that he is leading me but I also know that when I find my breath and collect myself, all taking no more than a second or two, waiting and hand contact gives me the confidence to start our movements as a team and a couple.



*The eyes have it*

Max Sinitsa and Sophia d'Angelo

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## *Conscious communication problems: A leading motivator for therapy*

The leading motivator for a couple to call me for a therapy appointment has always been their COMMUNICATION.

“Why is that when we talk he seems to only hear a portion of what I am saying?”

“We cannot talk without it turning in to an argument”

“I am so frustrated because I know what I want to say but just as I am about to talk it becomes jumbled and I am tongue tied.”

“I was never really listened to in my life, only talked to, so when I communicate I feel anxious and cannot express my needs.”

Not only do couples struggle with WHAT to communicate but also with HOW to communicate.

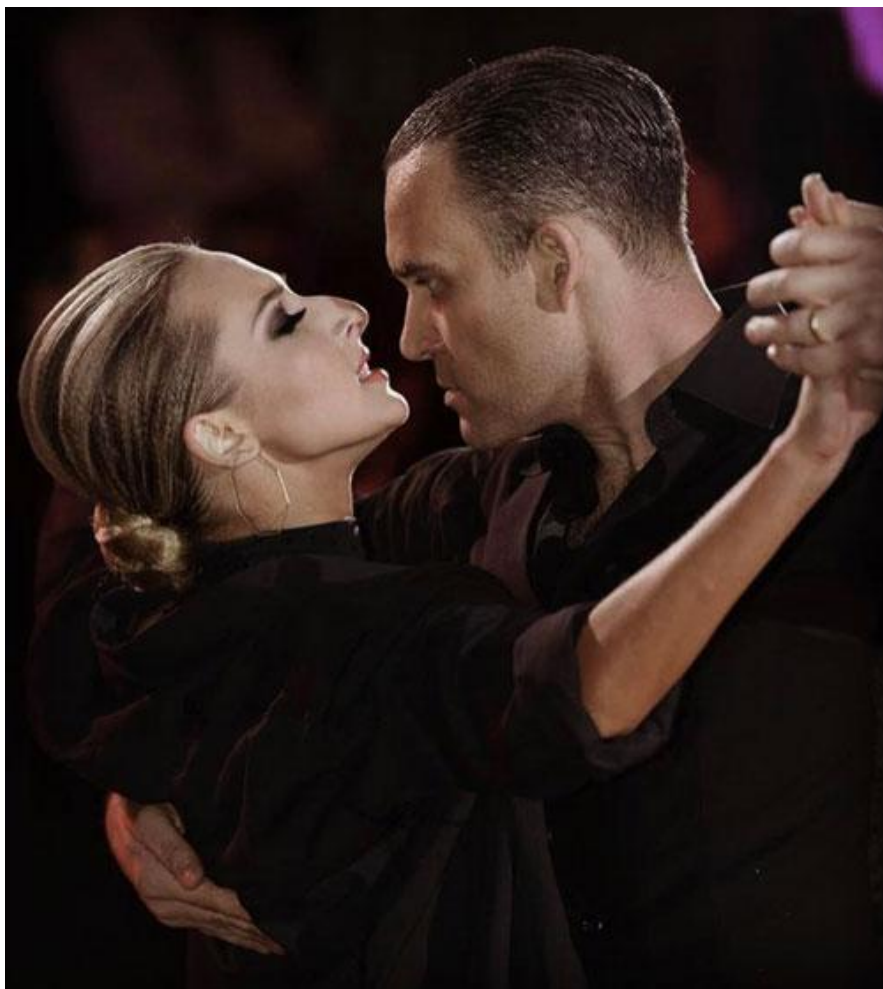
“How do I tell her this without her getting angry?”

These are only a few of the most salient concerns that are introduced by couples in therapy sessions. I have often said that where we go wrong and when we go wrong in our communication is at the moment we open our mouth and the words start flowing. How many times have you wanted to tell someone that they have done something hurtful to you? How many times have you longed for them to understand the impact their behavior has on you? Only to come up against a barrage of complaints about how YOU are the one who has the problem and not them?

## *Unconscious communication: Attachment theory and projective identification*

There are myriad self-help books out today that deal with communication for couples. There are even conferences and weekends where couples go to work through their communication style. That is where my husband and I learned about using “I” statements, the first

and foremost key to a healthy communication style. Drawing from personal experience, I feel confident in using that technique with my couples. I also believe that working on our personal attachment style, personal dynamics, and relational interactions is key to understanding our own communication and our interpretation of others.



*Unconscious Communication*  
Max Sinitsa and Tatiana Seliverstova  
© Charles Ryder Photography



When I was in a postgraduate psychoanalytic psychotherapy program, we studied attachment style as described by John Bowlby in his book *A Secure Base* 1988 and elaborated by his followers Mary Main and Mary Ainsworth in their research papers. They noticed that children need a secure base so that they can go out from there to explore the world. Reliable and comforting parents have children who have a secure attachment to them. Parents who are less secure themselves have children with insecure attachment styles that vary from being scared of leaving the secure base to behaving in a dismissive way as if a caring figure to rely on was of no importance to them. These attachment styles carry over into adulthood. We meet couples in which both of the partners are securely attached. In others one partner may be secure and the other insecure. The most troubled partnerships are those where both members of the couple are insecurely attached. They can't find the confidence to rely on each other and doubt their love.

Some people, like Peter and Ann, the couple we met in Chapter 2, attach by being attacking so as to hook the other person by negativity. Others push their partners away to create an aura of mystery, which appeals to those who are compelled to chase an elusive relationship. Some people like Patty in Chapter 1 cling until pushed away, since they often choose a partner who can't stand their dependency any more than they like it themselves. We make these choices to protect ourselves from pain, from acknowledging all the parts of ourselves, warts and all.

Another area of study through my postgraduate work was projective identification. We read about it in *Love, Hate and Reparation 1921-1945* and *Envy and Gratitude 1946-1963* by Melanie Klein, a psychoanalyst who worked with very young children and their mothers. She noticed that children are born with very strong feelings. Infants can express love as they snuggle and coo, and rage as they kick, scream and spit. These feelings are a bit overwhelming to the baby to sort out. When they get to be too much to handle, he pushes

the rage outside himself to protect his vulnerable self from the onslaught of such aggressive feelings. He also pushes the love outside to keep it away from his rage which could spoil his love. He gets rid of the feelings by “projecting” them into his mother. Projecting the loving feelings gives the baby a sense of having a good mother, while hateful feelings born of envy of her goodness give the idea she is a witch. Hopefully she can bear the feelings better than he can, and take the load off him. Under a spell like that, however, the mother sometimes feels like a witch, and responds more harshly than she wants to! She becomes like the person she has been imagined to be. This is what Klein means by “projective identification.” Jill Scharff has written about it in her book *Projective and Introjective Identification and the Use of the Therapist’s Self*. Adults still use this way of defending against overwhelmingly unpleasant feelings. Jill and her husband David, both psychoanalysts, have applied this idea in their work with couples as described in their textbook *Object Relations Couple Therapy* (1991). None of this is easy reading, but thankfully popular writer Maggie Scarf has elaborated on this in her best seller *Intimate Partners* (1988). These authors show how we tend to project our least admired characteristics into our spouse and attack them there by being critical or mean to that person. We also project our secretly admired parts into those we adore, until they disappoint us cruelly because no one can live up to that idealization.

### *Communication through eye contact, shyness and confidence*

Evoking awareness of our typical ways of protecting ourselves from pain by reviewing our attachment styles and our ways of projecting, perceiving and relating to others by projective identification are valid and useful approaches, tried and tested ways of doing couple therapy. In addition, I have developed personal approaches to couple therapy using attention to the body based on my experience as a ballroom

dance partner. As I said before, this does not mean that I engage with my patients physically as if they were my dance partners. I use my body awareness from dance partnering to tune it to the couple's experience, that couple's signature "dance". Then I help the partners tune into each other mentally, emotionally and physically mainly by asking them to engage in simple physical exercises. In this book I illustrate helping partners to concentrate on the experience of relating to each other without words, such as when they are holding hands, maintaining eye contact, listening to music together or agreeing to connect in a dance position and lead and follow a simple step.



*Still in communication*

Nikolai Pilipenchuk and Sophia d'Angelo

© Ryan Kenner Photography

I came upon a personal approach to working with couples' communication that I find truly eye opening, no pun intended. It rests on the idea that "The eyes are the window into the soul." I believe

most of us have heard that. I came across this notion one day in Latin dancing. Nikolai and I were working on our rumba with our coach Taliat. The coach watched patiently as we executed our steps and moved together in our Rumba. The Rumba has been described as the vertical expression of the horizontal act. I'll leave you with that thought for a moment and you'll get the picture. Taliat sat for a moment and then asked me, "What is it you are trying to say to him? What do you want to get across? What is your message?" He then continued, "This is the rumba. It is the most sensual dance of all the Latin dances. I believe the technical parts of your rumba look well executed but there is something missing. You are not communicating to each other and you are not communicating your desires. You are moving correctly but I don't see you saying anything to each other. Why?"

I had to stop and think about what he was saying. I felt I was communicating, although I knew that there was something getting in my way. He asked me why and what was the block. I explained that there is a part of me that can be shy. That I had the fear that if I really expressed myself that I would expose myself to rejection. That I could call Nik over with my body, show what I am trying to say without my words but that it would be seen as either too much, which would be shattering, or not enough, which would make me feel too vulnerable. In that way, I was really in a tough spot.

Even more specifically, I was less afraid to see what was in his eyes and more afraid that he would misperceive what was in my eyes. We have often heard that the eyes are the window into the soul. I had this belief that the eyes do not lie. It takes courage to share something which might make a person feel intruded upon or that it would feel too intrusive. The rejection or acceptance seemed impossible to tolerate. And then Taliat said something that I will never forget: "It is not your expression to HIM. It is your expression of what this music and what this movement feels like to YOU. No one can reject what is authentically coming from you. No one knows whether you love him or hate him at this moment. And we are not looking to understand your

deepest feelings towards your partner. We want to see what you say about this movement and how it relates to your partner.” I thought to myself, that THAT I could do. I could simply express something that is meaningful to me through my eyes to him and then through my body. But it still belonged to me. I was not giving it away. I was sharing with him and with the audience how I interpret this dance.

Taliat told me that no one could reject me for my personal expression of what I was feeling and saying. That my body was showing the audience and Nikolai what the feeling evoked by the dance—love, passion, connection, or loss—feels like TO ME. It is not about him. What we feel is not always about the other. I thought of all the times I have avoided direct eye contact with people because I felt that perhaps I could read what they were feeling too clearly and that they too could see through me. In the rumba with my partner, I can now look into his eyes, freely expressing, through my eyes and my body, my own experience, and that experience is mine, not anyone else’s. This is similar to the idea that I could use my “I” statements to get across what I am feeling and what my needs are to my husband without worrying about his rejecting me or feeling blamed by me.

I realized sadly how much I had missed out in life by not gazing into someone’s eyes and really taking in the essence of their soul. The feelings that come through are often pure and unadulterated. It takes courage and passion and compassion to stay connected to someone and to look into their eyes. I don’t have to annihilate my needs and desires to avoid rejection from the other. I can just let them be, and this will help my dancing and my relationships. And that insight will be of use to the couples who come to see me to work through their struggles in therapy.

Early in my career I became aware that many of the couples I treat in couple therapy choose to sit in the chairs or the couch that would give them the least ability to have eye contact with each other. I often thought with my couples in the treatment room what it might be like to communicate as we do on the ballroom floor. WITHOUT WORDS.

And this is where the body and the “EYES” have it. Then my learning from coaching in partnered dancing emboldened me to address this issue with a teaching exercise.

*Adrienne and Paul: Eye contact communicating desire*

Adrienne and Paul, a young, thirty something couple came to me to try to understand why their romantic life seemed so dull and so frustrating. After a few sessions, they shared that they are both physically attracted to each other, enjoy each other’s company, and share professional interests in that both work at the same law firm. They have many couple friends and can go out all night having great fun with them, and return home together only to find that the passion stops at the door. They shared that their conversations were always rich and filled with information and stories. They do not fight, so they have learned how to compromise and it seems to work. But they were struggling with this lack of passion in their romantic life.

Now I am very clear with my clients that I am not a sex therapist. I do not offer behavioral approaches to sexual dysfunction. But understanding the sexual desire of partners is part and parcel of the work of couple therapy. As I will often do, I slowly get information about their past relationships and, most importantly, their first relationships with their parents or caregivers. This information is critical for me to start putting together pieces of the puzzle that they themselves are not aware of.

Adrienne said that she believes her mother, who is now deceased, had suffered from depression her whole life. She remembers that as a little girl she would come in to her mother’s dressing room and find her crying. These crying jags lasted for many hours and sometimes for days. Adrienne felt that the only way to get her mother’s attention was to sit near her, talk to her, and tell her funny stories. She was able to help her mother calm down but she was still quite depressed. As years went by, Adrienne became the “entertainer” for her family and her mother. She loved performing on the stage and singing. Although she

went to law school, she never gave up on her weekend “gigs” singing in a cabaret and acting in local theatre productions. She loved knowing that people were watching her. She felt she had grabbed everyone’s attention, and she could hold it there.

While listening to Adrienne I could see her eyes light up with excitement. This was her expression of the excitement she never actually received from her mother. Babies work very hard to get the attention they need through connecting to the eyes and face of their mother. Their mother’s eyes light up in response to the baby and a mutually enlivening cycle of delight develops. It is destroying for the baby to look at a dead face, at eyes that fail to light up. So Adrienne, I believed, used her theatre and her music as a way to make sure that “ALL EYES” were on her, and that she had captured attention. But entertaining and engaging Adrienne was facing passionless, dead eyes in Paul. She was reliving the pain of failing to engage her emotionally dead mother in Paul, so to speak.

Paul, on the other hand, had very intrusive parents. They believed that they should be allowed to be privy to whatever Paul was doing with his friends as he was growing up. They were constantly asking questions, interrogating at all times. They kept tabs on his whereabouts and even would call to find out where he was once he arrived at a school party. This invasive behavior was why Paul learned to close off and to withhold information and responsiveness, and to go deep inside in order to protect his privacy.

It was after I gleaned this history from Adrienne and Paul that I combined my own dance journey with their struggles. I asked them to come to their next session having had no conversation for one day before. I asked that they come to my office and sit directly in front of each other without saying a word for the first half hour. I was asking them to just look into each other’s eyes and even into my eyes. I said that this was not a staring contest. There were no rules about how long you look into the other’s eyes but that you try to communicate with your eyes whatever thought or feeling passes through your mind.

There is no winning or losing or right or wrong. I told them that at any time that they felt unsafe they could put up a hand to signal that this exercise needed to stop. We would process our session at the end of the half hour or when they chose to stop.

The session began and Adrienne and Paul were compliant with the demands of the exercise. I was intrigued by the lack of eye contact. This was a couple who, for all intents and purposes, were quite close. Yet, when it came time to be quiet and to look at each other they seemed to roam around the room or look at me. Early on, about ten minutes in, it was Paul who stopped the session. He described that he felt too watched, too intruded upon. He said it wasn't that he felt he had a secret but that some things he was thinking he felt were private and he did not want to communicate them. I remembered his intrusive parents and his need to protect from their watchful eyes. And Adrienne felt that in choosing to stop so early he had revealed that he could not look at her and confirmed her feeling that he could not take her in. She felt that it proved that unless she is doing something to get attention, she will not get any attention or care. It was a very hard session.

As we continued on in further sessions together, it took us many months of working through their perceptions of what they felt was being said in each other's eyes and how the other person felt misread or misunderstood. I was immediately reminded of my coaching session and my fears about being seen or seeing my partner. And then I remembered what Taliat said. "This is *your* feeling, *your* expression, it is not his to take away from you. You own that feeling and it is yours. "

The non-verbal form of communication is critical in a life partnership and in a ballroom couple relationship. We aim to connect on the floor in a way that manages the delicate balance between telling the story we are trying to convey to our audience (our emotional connection) and guiding each other through the maze of movement while other couples surround us (our physical connection in space).



And we do this with our bodies, our eyes, our attunement – all without words. AHHH! Without words.

### *Communication styles in dance*

Early on when I began dancing with Max in American Smooth, he would often ask me to dance without any facial expression. He would challenge me to use my body as the vehicle for expression rather than my face. It was not only daunting but in some odd way, I felt he was saying, “You are too much. Your expressions are too bold.” Or maybe he was saying, “Your expressions are not enough, or wrong in some way,” This was like being told that my feelings were too much or the way I was expressing myself was wrong. It was hard to hear. But as time moved on, and we played with what it is like to dance a romantic waltz without using facial expressions, it forced me to use my body and rely on the music. Music is already the foundational emotional expression upon which the dance movement elaborates the story of love and connection. The expression on the face, as he was teaching me, was like putting an exclamation point after every word. There is reason to save the exclamation point and to use it wisely when really needed for impact. I illustrate this point with my couple in the treatment room.

#### *Alice and Sam: Over- and under-reacting*

Alice and Sam came to see me because Sam felt that no matter what he did it was always met by Alice with a furious face full of rage and disappointment in him. And Alice felt that she needed to raise her voice and interact strongly with Sam because he had little to no reaction. Often in my sessions with them I, too, would find myself on the other end of Alice’s hyperbolic reactions, her vicious face trained on me. I wondered on many occasions how she was hearing what I had said, since it didn’t seem to me to call for such a response. No doubt my face was registering my discomfort at her pressure. There

were times when I noticed that I would mute my facial expressions so as to make my verbal communication stand alone. In this instance I found that my lack of expression caused anxiety in Alice and produced calm in Sam.

In holding my face still, I was able to detect the impact on the couple of my calmness. It gave me access to the backstory they had in mind about what I might be thinking. And what about me? Did my body, my face, and the way I am sitting cause one of them to feel that I was withholding and the other to find me too forceful? I can ask, and then we can work on that. We can access the story that is already in our heads and that is being played out, leading us to misinterpret what the partner is saying and showing in our facial expression. This is when we reject the partner on the basis of our own misunderstanding, and fear the rejection that might occur as a result of communicating. Alice preferred highly stimulating expression although she had chosen him, and he preferred less stimulating expression and yet had chosen her. Why? What from earlier experience had left them with these preferences and vulnerabilities?

Alice needed to be loud and look dramatic because she felt that no-one really heard her. Alice was a child in an alcoholic, neglectful family. Without announcing herself she feared that she didn't exist. She longed for peace and Sam seemed likely to provide that. But then his valued quietness began to feel like the lack of response from her preoccupied family. Sam was the child of a vicious divorce with lots of yelling, which left him with a survival technique of keeping things calm while he moved around from one house to the other. Each of them had chosen the other because of what Freud called the repetition compulsion, a drive to keep doing the same thing over and over in a desperate attempt to keep doing what is known because it is familiar at the same time hoping to solve the original problem by trying and trying again. To put it the way the Scottish psychoanalyst Fairbairn described it in his book *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*, each of them was attached since childhood to fundamentally

unmanageable parental figures who lived on inside them as a problem that required continued attempts at control and recovery. In marriage Sam re-found this attachment to a loud and demanding figure in Alice while Sam represented the non-response that she dreaded from a family that was in chaos around her father's alcoholism. Perhaps Alice could learn that she didn't need to overdramatize her vocal and facial expressions and Sam could respond more easily.

And therein lies the beauty of what my coaches and partners were trying to get across to me. What Max is asking of me is similar to what I am asking of Alice. I asked her to think about what she was feeling independent of how Sam was reacting, instead of resorting to her "go to" expressions to relay her feelings. Can't we be seen and get our needs met without huge noise and facial expression? I was not asking her to tone it down, but asking her this: Does an angry loud voice ever mean that the other person will be better able to register your feelings? Sam can understand her anger without it being forced on him.

Similarly, Max was saying to me, "You don't have to emphasize what you are feeling by using conventional expressions to convey a thought or feeling. There are many subtle ways. Your body will do it in its way moving." If I feel that I must put an exclamation point after each movement then I am going to be so loud that the other has no choice but to drown me out, and I will lose my impact, and, even more, I will lose my connection and my point will be drowned out.



*Attuned Leading*

Nikolai Pilipenchuck and Sophia d'Angelo

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## CHAPTER 5

# FEMININITY, MASCULINITY

I have grappled the various expressions of my feminine and masculine sides for most of my life. When I began ballroom dancing and was now in a clearly defined or prescribed role as the woman in the partnership, my resistance to being in a prescribed feminine role was emphasized. Ballroom dancing is still the one place, I believe, that has a clearly defined role for the man and the woman. One could say, we are the flower that blooms around the stem. This is not to say that men are not beautiful or elegant in ballroom dancing, but in my opinion, the necessity is to show off the woman and for him to have a more prescribed masculine role, contrived as it may be or acted out, it still exists. In that light my question to myself was, “How do I see myself as a woman on the dance floor?”

### *Feminine and masculine conflict within*

At today’s coaching and practice session, Nikolai and I were delving in to the story about the cha-cha. What do we portray? This is a flirtatious dance. It calls up the idea of two people meeting and the banter and excitement that happens in that meeting. However, what I did was, rather than wait for him and allow him to move towards me in a desirous way, I hit a position, and he said it felt like I was almost

holding him back, stopping him. My body expressed a more challenging position rather than an accepting one. I understood what he was trying to say in that if we are portraying a flirtatious dance between two people than it would be off putting if one of them wasn't playing along but rather charging him. As I looked deeper in to why I couldn't simply receive the play between us, I was struck by the message it was sending me about myself.

I remembered encountering a similar problem working on tango. Max told me that tango is not a fight! In his interpretation, tango is the seductive dance of a man and woman who are deciding if in fact they want to go ahead and connect. There is the underlying story of tango, which once again can be a fluid story and interpretation. The woman's part in the history of tango recalls that of a flamenco dancer in Spain or a high-priced prostitute in Boca, and the man's part is deciding whether he wants to buy into it. I was reminded that the way I began this tango with Max was as if I was in a fight, a standoff position, an angry place, and one where I was going to win at all costs.

I include myself in this story because it was so telling about the fight inside me, and the nature of relationships in general. What is the story that we tell ourselves in a catch-and-release or catch-and-catch kind of play? What role are we playing subconsciously? What happens if you wait to see if the other will actually catch you? Am I so wary of the process that I undermine it before it even starts with this idea that it won't happen? I won't get caught by him, he won't desire me, and so I must block him to avoid hurt, or in order to get my needs met I MUST catch him first. Where does that leave me or any person in that scenario? Do we always feel as if we must control the outcome? Is the longing so strong that we cannot bear the possibility that we will not be desired? Is there an underlying anger towards the other that has me want to devour rather than be devoured?

In tango we dance much of the time in hold. Although it appears to be a strong dance it can be danced as smoothly as the waltz but with staccato

movements as well. That tells us something else of use for the couple in love to contemplate. How do we show our inner strength and our independent power but still move as one and not overpower the other?



*Tango*

Max Sinita and Tatiana Seliverstova

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## *The feminine engine*

The dances of tango and cha-cha which are the most flirtatious and seductive become a stand in for what is at times unreachable or unattainable. In dancing we see it emphasized. There is no way to hide the unconscious. Fear and desire seem to flow out uncontrollably. The body movements that characterize these dances play a large role in what we are saying to our partners. In cha-cha, the body moves in quick, small movements, with the hips doing most of the action while the upper body tries to recreate the movement. I once was told that the woman's body is in continuous motion. The man steps in and guides her in the direction he chooses. Another way I have put this is that the woman is the engine but the man is the computer, the cruise control, the GPS, and the steering. As the engine she never stops moving. That is no small feat to accomplish.

If we think about what that means in a couple relationship we could compare it to a woman in continuous movement managing the household, going to work, bearing and raising children, and the man needing to find her rhythm and follow suit rather than to stop her. In the 21st Century, a man is more likely to share in household tasks and the woman is equally responsible for tuning in to his rhythm. It means sharing the lead and doing that well. It means being attentive to each other, listening and watching and having a strong sense of the other. It's the opposite of enmeshment. It requires us to actually contemplate when to move and how.

## *The dance of the couple*

What does each dance mean to each person in each unique dance couple? Is it a story for those few minutes that the couple is sharing between themselves, or is it a story that we tell the audience about the nature of that dance? Is each person in the dance going through the motions of describing the sensation of being in that dance, but not



particularly associated with that partner? That would be more like masturbation than loving interaction. Is the partner so focused on himself in the present moment that being in the relatable moment would almost throw one off balance? It would feel like a duty or something to get through. When one's partner is preoccupied, could it feel as if one is left holding the desire while the other is withholding it. When that dance play repeats itself it can be a torturous loop of love, longing and withdrawal. It is not uncommon to meet couples who are in that play continuously. How do we manage it? How can we hold on to ourselves and not let this become overwhelming? It takes contemplation, self-reflection, owning your own contribution to the difficulties, maybe therapy. And in terms of the dancing couple, many hours on the dance floor, as well.

### *Strength, desire, vulnerability, and non-conformity*

As a therapist, I find it intriguing to know that this topic of how to be a strong, independent woman, yet one who could express desire and vulnerability, had such weight for me and tremendous symbolism. I think I am not alone in saying that in today's world masculinity and femininity have multiple meanings to oneself and to others. With each generation the concept moves and shifts. When I was a child in the 1960s, being a woman and a man was clearly prescribed. Tolerance was low for non-conforming sexualities. We didn't understand then what we now understand about the LGBTQI+ community. The world was far more black and white on the topic of sexual representation. I do not believe that anything has changed in terms of what people are attracted to or how they feel inside. I am thinking about how we individually see ourselves in these roles, how it gets represented in this traditional sense in ballroom dance, and how we see ourselves in our coupled relationships on and off the dance floor.



*Sharing the Story*

Max Sinitsa and Sophia d'Angelo

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I remember very clearly as a young girl having to wear the dresses that my grandmother, a seamstress, would labor over for days. They often had white lace and ribbons and were as I called them then “fluffy”. They were more often than not, pink or in the pink color family. I tried to explain that I did not feel comfortable in those “fluffy” dresses. I wasn’t certain why because I loved dressing my dolls in prescribed female clothing and I loved my ballet tutus and all the pink you could put on me for my dance classes. But outside in the world, it was jeans and a tee-shirt—with hiking boots added as I became a teenager. I believe, in some way, I really related to my brother who was small in stature, but a mighty guy. He was a wrestler and a cross country runner whom I idealized in every way. I followed him, tried to walk and talk like him. He was a walking legend to me. Perhaps, I saw myself as his clone and believed that by my wearing very “girly” clothes, I would somehow suggest to him and to me that we were no longer Sympatico.

I’m not certain that much has changed for me in terms of what clothing I choose to wear, including my ballroom dresses. I still wear jeans and t-shirts. My dance competition gowns have always been less “frilly” than most -- clean cut patterns, less jewelry, but certainly very flowing and very feminine. But all this speaks to how we each, individually, express our innate sexuality and our feminine and masculine side.

### *Being the feminine to the masculine*

When I think of these terms as they relate to ballroom dancing I am reminded of an event that happened to me. It was a few years in to my American Rhythm dancing and competing. This takes us to consider the rumba again. At that time I was dancing with a pro who had a powerful and masculine way of dancing. He moved fast and was very strong. Although we were winning most of our competitions I often would hear critiques from my coaches that I was appearing to dance like him, and

that I was not being the “feminine” to his “masculine.” About a year later I began dancing Latin with Nikolai. He is long, lean, and less forceful but more exact, very masculine in his own way, with a natural beauty to his movements, neither too masculine nor too feminine. But Latin dance, in my opinion calls for a prescribed style, a particularly Latin way of “being”. I have struggled with wanting to mimic him but at the same time present my most feminine side so that the judges and the audience are aware that I am no longer trying to dance like him but rather dance WITH him.

This quandary or confusion may not seem like a very poignant or troubling internal question, but it was a larger statement about me, that I thought was very eye opening. Was I that little girl who felt the need to become my brother in order to be included or was I that little girl who really did love dolls and dreaming about ballroom dancing while getting dressed in my ballet pink tutu for my fifth ballet class that week? I loved every second about being a princess but wasn’t certain I could pull it off in real life outside of ballet and fantasy. I never played a sport but mostly chose to be with the boys and hang out with them nonetheless.

It wasn’t until recently when a very well-known Latin dance coach, clearly said to me about my partner Nikolai: “That is the way he has to dance that line. You are the woman. You can use more accentuated hip movements. You can design your body differently and rotate more. When he leads you somewhere, even if he does feel overpowering, as many men do, the woman can be a bit behind as if to say, I will move but in my way.” I loved that concept. That I was not just a doll to be thrown around or ordered as he leads me: I will certainly go as he leads the step but I go just a few seconds afterwards; I stand on my own feet and I know the direction I am going. There is a subtle way in which a woman changes her steps or body movements which creates a very feminine look without it being overly prescribed or too blatant. Yet it gives the woman a sense of power of her body and self.

## *Who are we in our couple?*

So here we come to the most difficult part of these concepts. Who are we in our couple as male and female? How do we see ourselves in our couple? The world may be filled with fluid identities and sexual orientations but how do we work through that in the dancing couple and how do we work through that in the romantic couple? How do we speak to our partners about what we need and who we are in both the dancing couple and the intimate or partnered couple? HOW can we be ourselves?

### *Darcy and Peter: Changing roles*

That is the question that Darcy and Peter, as I will call them, faced under pressure from Peter's mother. It was late in the day and I was about to close my office when the phone call came in. I felt I should take it because I was waiting for the call from the husband of another couple who was going to call and confirm an appointment. Instead of him, I heard the voice of a woman clearly quite upset. She quickly said that she and her husband needed an emergency session as she was afraid they were moving towards separation. We met.

Darcy and Peter entered my office. I often look at how a couple enters, who enters first, where they choose to sit, who begins to talk, how they relate. These details provide information on how the couple defines their roles. They show me how the couple interacts in unconscious communication to each other or to me or to the world outside. The meaning of their behavior is not written like a code inscribed in stone, but how they interact in taking to the therapy setting certainly alerts the therapist to reflect on its meaning. In this instance Darcy walked in first. She sat down immediately while Peter walked many paces behind, unsure of where to sit. He sat with his legs crossed, quiet and demure in manner. In contrast, Darcy maneuvered grandly around the room and looked directly into my eyes while Peter

averted his gaze. Darcy had originally called, so that had given me a clue about who was taking the initiative to be in my office.

I began in my usual way, which is to say, “What brings you to me here today?” Darcy began to explain that she was very angry at Peter’s mother. Apparently Peter and Darcy have an “unconventional” marriage as her mother-in-law points out. Darcy is the main bread winner and Peter stays home with their two-year-old son. Darcy often travels, so Peter is in charge of all the outside activities for their son as well. Since Darcy works later hours, Peter makes the dinner for all of them and has it ready so that Darcy has a good meal when she gets home from work. Darcy and Peter have an understanding about this arrangement and feel that it has been working out. Nonetheless, Peter’s mother must have communicated her dislike for this arrangement and then Peter began to wonder if he was in fact being “domesticated” as his mother would suggest. This set both Peter and Darcy into a tail spin, feeling confused about their roles as wife and husband and mother and father.

Darcy and Peter continued to see me for many months and in this time they were each able to share their individual confusions about their feminine and masculine roles in family life. The differentiation of roles in their marriage was exacerbating their own confusion inside. They both struggled with what was expected of them and what they felt was innate and authentic. Did they like the roles they were playing or was it too strict? Did they need to counterbalance it to allow for times when they each wanted to play the feminine or masculine role and what would that look like? What would it be and what would it mean to them?

In my intervention, I began to think about my role confusion in my own dancing and inside myself. Who was I on the dance floor? Was I a prodigy of the men I was dancing with and wanting to be as powerful as they were? Did I want to prove my strength and my ability and did I want to defy the role of a “woman”. Was it an unconscious need to be rebellious and not follow convention? And if so, was this helping

me or hurting me? Was I also missing out on the moments when that little ballerina with her pink tutu wanted to be seen as a delicate princess. How was I going to marry the two? And so I thought of Darcy and Peter.

As I approached our next session I asked them if they were willing to do an experiment. Would they stand up and try to partner each other in a simple dance step? The dance step was one where at one point Peter needed to tell Darcy where he wanted her to go by gently suggesting with his hand that she move in that direction. And then I asked Darcy to do same to Peter. I asked both of them to tell me how they felt.

After Darcy was “led” by Peter I asked her to sit for a moment and just look inside herself and feel what that felt like and describe it to me. She began to cry. Darcy was able to share that part of her was angry and wanted to say, “I will go when I want to go! Don’t push me.” And the other part of her felt young, able to give up control and be taken, almost in a sensually exciting way. She shared that there was a moment when she just let go and let Peter take over and that moment allowed her something she had not felt in many years, which was to feel taken care of, not just superficially but as if he was truly protecting and guiding her.

Peter shared something similarly instructive. He shared that he felt powerful, in charge, but also very careful and loving towards Darcy. It was a role reversal for them in a way. Although Peter cares for Darcy by managing the household and their son he does not feel as if the agreed roles of giver and taker made for a strong connection. In the dance exercise they found a model for each having their feet on the ground and being able to move when they wanted AND making the choice to move when asked.



*Letting Go*

Michael Choi and Sophia d'Angelo

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## *Surface and depth in the male-female story*

I want to talk about the very confusing and at times very painful experience of the other woman in the ballroom. What does it mean to watch the man you are dancing with turn away to dance with another woman? Does he prefer dancing with her? Will he ever come back for me? And what is it like for the spouse who comes to the competition to watch his partner dance in the arms of another man?

One of the Open Gold dancers that I often meet and compete against in competitions has become a friend. One time her husband came along to watch her dance. As he watched from the distance numerous times that day, watching her move steps in sync, hand in hand, eye to eye in another man's arms, I wondered how he could do that. What does it take to compartmentalize in that way? Is it because he is so detached from her? Does he neutralize the energy between the dance partners and see the way they interact as non-threatening? This was his wife in the care of another man's hands! He approached her after the event and said, "I now understand the story of each dance." He was watching closely, but from a very different place in his mind than she expected. He was seeing something far different than she thought he would notice.

The husband described his understanding of what he saw. He said, "I get it! The slow waltz is the beginning of the romance, the tango is the battle of power and sex, the foxtrot is the playful commingling of the two, and the Viennese waltz is the final bliss and coming together of the couple. In the Latin dances, the cha-cha is the flirtatious date, the samba is the wild night, the rumba is the vertical symbol of the horizontal act, and the jive is the couple at play." It was an astute observation.

When I work with couples I often keep those dances and their representations of the life of a couple in my mind. And when I dance I keep that story, and those stories, in my mind. However, there are complex layers to the basic stories. They are as complicated as the

people in them. They reflect the life of the couple, the story they each perceive, and the lie inside the story when what is felt is not reciprocated. That is when the story of each dance may become the beginning of the unravelling of the couple both in the ballroom and in everyday life.

The dance then becomes a story of confusion over what one person's touch means to the other person, a confusion over identity. More than once, my coach in International Latin asked me to express to my partner, while dancing the rumba, what I wanted him to know, to think about what does each step, each movement mean, and how do my movements relay that meaning to him. In dance, he said, I should ask him with my eyes and my body to come to me, to need me, to want me. Really he was asking me to show him who I was as a sensual being, as a woman. He asked me why I was not showing him this. I thought about it and then realized that, in fact, I was shy. I was concerned that what my partner would see was perhaps not for him to see. That what I would be sharing was private. I thought of others I knew in my life whose stories tell of unrequited love. This is my dance partner that I needed to maintain boundaries with and who was my friend, yet I was being asked to show my private emotions. One could feel as if you are left holding your heart in your hands. Feeling as if you are the fool. Feeling the mistiming of heart and soul and movement. There are songs just for that, and they've been written for centuries. It is an age old hurt and one that all of us know in some form or another. Love lost or love not returned.

The coach, very wisely, took me aside, arms wrapped around mine looking straight into my eyes. He said, "O my dear, no one can ever reject you if you are showing what is in your soul. It is your interpretation of the movement. If I am there as your dance partner, I am standing for the person who will meet that desire, but it is not for me." I understood. He was saying to me, "It is YOURS!" It does not belong to him. If it is not his, then it belongs to you. You are showing others what it feels like to be you in that moment, in that music, in

your body. It is not for him to reject or accept. I have told you this story before, but still, as I write this, my breath catches and my heart seems to skip a beat. I am filled with a moment of hesitation and then I fully recognize the truth. I had avoided showing who I was and avoided exposing my vulnerabilities to my partner because of my fear that he could see through me and see what my heart looked like, and then use it against me or scoff at it. That he or anyone watching would see my vulnerabilities. But, no! It is not up to him. It is my interpretation of the dance story and my expression of myself, and whether he returns the expression or not, I am being true to my art, and to my heart.

Often when I see a couple for the first time in my therapy room, I watch the partners' body language as they describe themselves and the concerns they are facing and I learn how they interpret the nature of their relationship. I am listening for what IS NOT being said. I am listening with two ears, so to speak. The first ear, much like the dancing couple, collects the story of the dance. In this case, it is the story of their relationship, their beginning, their experience of each other in their own words. And with the other ear I am listening for what is not being said, what I infer from the facial expressions and body language. Similarly, as I am watching a couple dancing a romantic waltz, one part of me is noticing that they are technically proficient, but another part of me may be unmoved, asking, "Is this waltz truly romantic?" I think the parallels are quite fitting.

### *Stacy and Brian: Keeping up appearances*

Stacy and Brian are in their mid-fifties. Stacy originally called and in a low-key, maybe even morose, voice made the appointment. Upon inviting them into the therapy room, I was struck by the jovial way they entered. Each wearing a smile and moving with alacrity. I remembered Stacy's tone on the phone which sounded upset to me. Nonetheless, they arrived cheerful and ready to start. I felt intrigued

by the contrast but I waited to learn more from them. I asked them why they chose to come to see me.

Stacy began, “Well you know that I was the one who originally called you but both Brian and I are willing and happy to come in and work with you. We feel very much in love and we know that we have a strong bond and a strong friendship but our children have all left, and I think it is just good for us to come in and have a, sort of a, checkup.”

As Stacy was talking I observed Brian and his body language. His foot began to tap. He wrapped his arm around his waist, and he often looked away from both Stacy and me. I asked Brian to share why he thought he was here. He looked glum, the same way Stacy had sounded on the phone.

Brian replied, “I agree that we are friends and I agree that it is time for us to come in now that our children are grown. Stacy and I have been together for most of our adult life. It is all we know. We have a full life and an active life. We have many friends. We make good money and we really don’t argue that much. Most people would think that this is a fairytale marriage. That we are very much in love. In fact, I think it would be really shocking to people in our lives if they knew that we were here.”

Brian took a breath and continued, “But the truth is, I am not happy. I feel lonely. I feel like I want to feel as I did long ago but I cannot seem to find those feelings.”

At that moment, Stacy looked shocked and stunned. As our session continued it was apparent that Brian had not wanted anyone to know how he felt. He had continued for many years playing the story of the relationship. Playing what he felt was the right interpretation of his story. And Stacy believed it and wanted to believe it.

The work was going to be long and for each, in their own way, very painful. It is the story of a couple who has convinced themselves and others that what you see is what is real. But the truth is that what you hear is not what is felt. The need to present a pretty picture comes

from both a need to believe in it and a fear that it is not true. The idea in ballroom dancing, from many people's perspective is that the man is there to show off the woman, to create a series of pretty pictures. But unless the partners appreciate themselves, express themselves, inhabit their roles fully, and build an intimate partnership they trust, the dance will not tell a true story.

### *Perceptions of passion*

Now we go back to the observation of the stories of the dance —the romance of waltz or the flirtatiousness of samba and cha-cha. I recently asked one of my partners whether he felt American Smooth was more passionate than International Latin. Before I tell you his answer, let me explain.

In American Smooth (waltz, tango, foxtrot and Viennese waltz) the partners are almost always touching at some place on their body. If they are separate it is not for long and they are still interacting. It has a fairytale way of moving, gliding, almost like ice skating. The music can be very romantic and balletic. The dresses are flowing, sometimes revealing and often angelic.

In International Latin the partners are constantly separating. It is very athletic. More athletic than any other ballroom dance style. The choreography is often a “cat and mouse” sort of play. The music is fast and often sexy, or at least plays a strong beat to dance to. The woman's clothing is very revealing. In fact, she wears very little clothing. He chases and she runs or decides when she wants him.

So, which would you think of as more truly passionate – the romantic or the athletic? My partner responded in a surprising way. He said that he did not feel that the romantic American Smooth was more passionate. And then it occurred to me. Here might be a couple on the dance floor expressing a romantic dance, looking in love, sharing their love through their movement but all the while not feeling at all passionate.

## *Hate and authenticity*

Remember the coach who told me that I should own my own feelings, sensual enjoyment, and not worry about being rejected if they are not reciprocated by my partner? This same man told a story of how moments before he and his wife were to compete at Blackpool, they had one of their most horrific arguments. Blackpool Dance Festival being the first and foremost ballroom dance competition in the world, the stakes for them as a professional couple were particularly high. Their anger was so fierce, he said, that he felt like he could have killed her, metaphorically. But as they called his number to go out on the dance floor, the couple united to present to the audience the best rendition of a rumba, the vertical expression of the horizontal act. The people watching, as he described it, had tears in their eyes. They said that this was the most beautiful love story they had ever seen!

What was that about? Were they being like Stacy and Brian creating a show that belied their true feelings? I don't think so. If that were so, the audience could not have responded as he described. Unlike Stacy and Brian, my coach and his wife had fully expressed and acknowledged their hate to the extent of murderous thoughts, and in their dance they connected again with their love. That is what makes their relationship authentic and their dance a powerful communication.

## CHAPTER 6

# MY SPACE; YOUR SPACE

International Standard or American Ballroom dancing is like a three-legged sack race in that the two partners must move in unison, legs, hips, arms and torso all meeting and touching at various times, staying in balance and moving surely—and in competition, aiming to be the best. In addition, we women are dancing as Ginger Rogers said, “backwards and in heels.” Not only that our head is held at an angle such that, as one coach put it, “you should see the room almost horizontally.” So that is quite a three-legged race.

### *Boundaries: Keeping your head*

Recently, while working on our closed position in American Smooth dancing, Max asked me if I knew how or why the woman’s frame is such that her head is held in the outward direction, looking up and away from the man’s head. He went on to say that the closed position in ballroom used to be quite different years ago. Then the man held the woman very closely, full body and heads touching or the woman’s head practically on the man’s shoulder. The woman was not interested in being that close, so she used her left hand with three fingers resting on his right bicep as a point of connection from which she could push

her head up and away from his as if to say “ No, no, no!”. This allowed her space while also being close.



*My Space, Your Space*  
Nikolai Pilipenchuk and Sophia d’Angelo  
© Dancesport Photography by Alexander Rowan



Our lessons, in the beginning stages of work, early on, began with consistently working on our frame and our hold. Often the man would say to me, “This is my space and this is your space. Do not encroach my space, and I will do the same for you. Once you move in to my space, I cannot move easily nor can you.” I found this concept intriguing. As a dancer I would listen to his directions and explanations, and then as a therapist I would apply them in symbolic ways of looking at couple relationships. The terms seemed so appropriate, direct and manageable for thinking about couples outside the ballroom as well. What does it mean to have boundaries of space in a couple? How do we listen to the non-verbal cues about honoring space and boundaries? What happens to us as our space becomes absorbed or invaded? How do we communicate the need for space? In ballroom dancing, the lack of spatial awareness is clearly visible to the couple as they find themselves literally in a collision that hinders all movement. The same happens within the couple relationship, but it takes longer to confront the damage, and sometimes it is too late.

### *Fredrica and Simon: Clinging and distancing*

Fredrica and Simon came to my office clearly as their last attempt to hold their marriage of twenty-two years together. They were married in their early twenties having dated in college and marrying just out of school. Both had not dated anyone else and fell madly in love, they reported. Fredrica came from Italy with her family and was accustomed to living in small spaces back in her home country in a family of five children and many cousins. Weekends were spent with the children running carefree in their neighborhood and then not returning until lights were on in the street. She felt secure and loved. She came to the US in her late teens as an au pair. She loved the US so much that she decided to stay. Some of her siblings now live in the US too but her parents and grandparents stayed in Italy. In contrast, Simon was born and raised in the US and was an only child. His

parents owned a retail store in the city and both of them would work much of the day and into the evening. Simon would come home from school alone, complete his homework, and often wait until eight or nine o'clock for his parents to return when they would then have dinner, and off to bed he would go. It was easy to see why each of them gravitated to the other: Simon looking for someone to give him companionship and security, searching for a way not to feel the loneliness he felt as a child; Fredrica, feeling more alone than she ever had in her life with her large family, needing warmth and connection to her adopted country.

Simon shared that over time he was beginning to feel encroached upon. He said that he felt that he had no space to explore anything without Fredrica wanting to be a part of his exploration. He was at a place in his life where he wanted “space.” Simon took up golf and cycling in order to find ways to be outside and alone. Fredrica was experiencing Simon’s new sport activities as ways to avoid being with her and thus she was becoming even more needy for time with Simon. The combination of the clinging and distancing became a test for how each could negotiate their need for more or less space.

### *Attending to the broken frame*

As I spent weeks working with this couple I was often reminded, in my coaching sessions that I would move into Max or Nikolai’s space. My understanding of the “ballroom hold” was that my knees would touch his, my hips would touch his, and my right chest would touch his, all the while my head being placed outside the frame. It is a conundrum because in ballroom dancing if the woman moves off the man’s side then the frame is considered “broken” (or worse, the woman is “broken”) – a term for the mistake of moving outside the frame and so making the step more difficult. How completely confusing to be told to stay connected but to give him his space. It is a paradox. Yet, this is the suggestion. I finally realized that my

connection to him is all-important. In Smooth, parts of the body are in constant touch but I cannot lean on him or push my weight into his or I become heavy, drag him down, and he has no ability to move on his own. It is the same for Latin dancing. The frame is still critical. I must stand on my own, our connection through hands or body part light and movable.



*Counterweight*

Max Sinita and Sophia d'Angelo

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Fredrica and Simon returned to my office both very frustrated with the lack of connection. My goal was to explore the possibility of finding the connection that is just right, as it is in ballroom dancing. I believe that the concept of space within a relationship is about honoring the other person and sensing the moments they need space and understanding why they might need space. I believe that the partner who is requesting space needs to be responsible for the way they ask for space so that it is clear that it is a need of theirs not a

rejection of their partner. This calls for attunement with your partner. Often we feel rejected when someone says to the other, “Leave me alone.” But, in actuality, it is critical for each of us in our partnerships to honor a person’s need to move without hindrance. The ultimate expression of that is the old saying, “If you love it, let it go.”

### *Existential anxiety*

We are designed to be social animals. We need others. I was once in a conference, many years back, working on attachment styles. One of the most profound comments, one that has stayed with me for years was, “Never underestimate that people may not feel they exist.” I have used that in my work with couples. I find that if I am aware of that existential anxiety then I have a greater understanding of why people encroach on another’s space or feel frightened of abandonment. If a person is not certain that they truly exist, then they look to their partner as a mirror for proof that they are there. They are in great need to feel the other’s presence so that they feel their own presence. The problem lies in the over-use of the other that leads to a feeling of suffocation. But does the person who wishes to have the space actually struggle with the fears that perhaps they, too, are feeling dependent on the other and that the rejection of the partner’s apparent need is about their own fear of rejection or dependency?

Fredrica and Simon returned to my office still struggling with the conflict between her need to feel close to and needed by Simon and his need to retreat. I asked them to watch something on a video. The video was of a couple practicing dancing in a ballroom hold. The partners move in unison as a couple, connected at the hip, torso, hands, and part of chest, their heads looking in opposite directions. His head is straight up and looking forward while she moves her head out of his way and is looking behind him and to the side. The couple moves without a flaw or a bump. Suddenly what we see is a moment when the couple stop mid-dance, and separate as if something went wrong.

The partners figure out that they had pulled apart at that moment because her knees were bumping his. She had pushed her knees too far forward, making it hard for him to move. It was important for her to know just the right delicate balance between being in close touch and giving his legs the room to move. I explained that in this dance analogy “close hold” does not mean that her body weight is resting on his or that her body parts get in his way. It means that they are in proximity, closer than in most kinds of sport or dance form, AND it can only work without a flaw if each partner maintains responsibility for their own balance and stays in their own space within that close hold.

I asked Fredrica and Simon if they could see the similarities, and if so how they could use this analogy to address their current struggle. What was said between the two of them was, I believe, the first time that each took responsibility for their own needs and desires. Fredrica had seen, she reported, that if she wanted to have a relationship that flowed well she could honor the parts of her that wanted to be connected to Simon but also honor his need to have a clear view ahead. She was able to see that connection has moments of bumps and starts and stops but that if they check in with each other they can realign themselves. That would bring her peace of mind. And Simon was able to own that he needed to have his space so that he could walk his own path but that he also really enjoyed having Fredrica in step with him in his life.

Again the lessons from the ballroom proved helpful as we discussed the concept of “close but not too close” and of mutual dependence and independence in order to flow easily. It is the “dance” of the couple in its ultimate expression.

## CHAPTER 7

# MUSICALITY

What do we mean when we say a couple has musicality? Merriam-Webster defines it as “1. Sensitivity to, knowledge of, or talent for music. 2. The quality or state of being musical: melodiousness.” The website [danceadvantage.net](http://danceadvantage.net) describes it this way: “Musicality in dance has two main components, receptivity and creativity. Musical receptivity is one’s ability to receive, comprehend, being sensitive to, and have a working knowledge of musical concepts like rhythm, tempo, phrasing, and even mood.” You get the general idea. But these terms mean many things to many people and vary with the context.

### *Rhythm, tempo, phrasing and mood*

Let’s think about rhythm and tempo, phrasing and mood in dance and in domestic life. On the ballroom dance floor, rhythm can refer to the dancers’ natural feeling for the beat of the music or it can refer to the beat that they respond to, that strong, regularly recurring pattern of sound in a systematic arrangement of notes that are short or long, stressed or unstressed. Rhythm can also refer to the artistic, harmonious sequence of dance movements that the dance partners develop to co-ordinate with the musical rhythm and its emotional

message. Couples need rhythm in everyday life too, not to dance through life, but to enjoy the security of a regularly recurring sequence of events, actions, or processes. Tempo is the speed at which the music should be played for a particular dance style measured by the number of bars per minute, and it also refers to the pace of events in the life of an intimate couple. For the dancer, phrasing refers to the timing of slow and fast steps danced to each section of the music. For the intimate couple phrasing has to do with using tone, volume, pace, and pause in effective combination as they put emotions, thoughts, and feedback into words in a way that is easy to take in. For the dancer mood is an atmosphere and an emotional tone that the dance conveys. For the couple mood is an emotional state that their physical expression and tone of voice conveys.

### *Bob and Nancy: Words and music*

I am immediately transported from the dance studio to the treatment room with my couple in session. We are talking at great length about the way in which Bob has a difficult time with Nancy's lack of compassion, her seeming insensitivity to myriad pressures he feels to work and still find time to be there for his family. Bob and Nancy have three children under the age of four. Anyone knows that is tough. Nancy is a stay-at-home mom, caring for the children while Bob is working as a lawyer in a startup firm. He leaves very early in the morning and returns for dinner but then goes back to work after the children have had dinner and gone to bed. This pattern and schedule leave both Bob and Nancy feeling deprived of their connection, communication, and romance. They are each working hard to make the family work but have lost sense of what it means to have their relationship work. They both report that their fights have become frequent, their words mean and cutting. Their patience is thin for either person's needs or complaints, leaving both of them feeling lonely and angry.

I am struck at the moment by the way they are speaking to each other. I am well aware of the complexity of raising a family and the associated difficulties of time management and finding time for the couple. I hear what they are saying but more important than what they say is the way they say it. I notice in particular the rhythm of their language. Bob has a loud tone with a constricted range of tone and volume, long in phrasing, so that it feels forceful and persistent, whereas Nancy, has a low volume, a quiet tone that is almost pleading, using very short phrases. She allows Bob to continue talking at length, getting in a few words at a time, only to shut down and appear less engaged. In many ways both make very good points that need negotiation, but the way that they struggle is not productive.

### *Tuning in*

These are the moments I often tell my couples, “It is not IF you fight, it is WHEN you fight and HOW you fight that makes all the difference in the world to feeling heard and reaching solutions.” I do not assume that either one of them is right, or has the responsibility to make it right. But they do need to learn to listen and observe everything about each other and how they view their relationship. They and I can do this by tuning in to the rhythm, the cadence, the tempo of their communications and the tenor of their relationship. It is like listening to all the instrumental lines and overall composition and how we are given to feel when trying to understand and respond to a piece of music.

Bob and Nancy have shared with me that both of them come from very complicated histories with their family of origin. Bob had a mother who was very critical of him as a child. She was quite depressed and often would take her anger out on him as a boy. He learned how to please her by “doing” what was necessary but all the while knowing that it was not what he wanted to do but did it to just stop the criticisms and the anger. Nancy grew up with a raging father and parents who fought all the time. Her father was working two jobs to keep the family in a steady state.



When at home, he drank heavily and often erupted. She was afraid of his alcoholic outbursts and was never certain of the outcome. She believed that staying quiet and “waiting for the storm to blow over” was the easiest way to manage. Her father’s raging was frequent and no matter how she tried to respond, he would be inconsolable.

When forming a couple we unconsciously search out a mate with familiar traits that echo the problematic aspects of our primary figures in childhood so that we can revisit things that we were unable to work through with them, and try to do so with someone new. I was beginning to understand Bob and Nancy’s musicality in the context of their families of origin. The tune playing in their heads was that an angry outburst was always just around the corner. As children they suppressed their own rage and fear, staying quiet and trying to please so as to avoid triggering an outburst. As adult partners, they felt free to fight it out in ways they didn’t dare do as children, and at the same time they had no experience to draw on. Instead Bob was too loud and insistent and Nancy was too quiet and withdrawn. The notes in the base clef were overplayed and the treble clef, which usually carries the melody, was swamped.

### *Listening and responding*

As I relate musicality to my dancing and the lessons I learned I realized that being musical is one of the MOST important elements to a dance partnership. I am dancing with a man who, in my opinion, is the most musical male dancer on the floor to date. Let’s think about how to listen for the rhythm of the music. Learning this begins at the most basic level—counting the beat and the bars of music, noting whether the key is major or minor, and checking the volume. You will have heard instructors counting “1-2-3” (Waltz) or “Slow-Slow-Quick-Quick” (foxtrot) and so on. Beyond that, we ask ourselves: When does the music begin to crescendo and when does it not? How do we respond emotionally to the music? How are we moved to move individually to the music? How will we dance and be sensitive to the music? In other

words, how do we as a couple dance to the music that is playing and not the music in our own individual head? We want to listen, react, understand the message of that particular song, sense how our partner interprets that music in their body, and work toward a shared response to the music.



*The Weight of it All*

Max Sinitsa and Tatiana Seliverstova

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This task is no different than what Bob and Nancy are working on. How can they begin to listen to each other in a new way and listen to the words and the emotions and feelings that are being discussed at the moment, not what is in their imagination, fueled by fears from the past and fears of repetition. This is a common phenomenon in couples—to transfer old ways of communicating or old patterns of behaviors on to the relationship, thereby, not really “listening to the music that is being played”.

One day I found my musicality put to the test. Every time I remember it, it feels as if I am in the present moment again. As I begin my waltz I notice that I am somewhere other than in the music. I am caught up in my feelings about the music and my expression of my moves, but I cannot truly hear the music. The music is an orchestral piece unknown to me. It has moments where it picks up a bit and slows down. Max quietly whispers, “Listen to the music.” I am jolted and automatically reminded that I am moving my body, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3. But how am I moving it? Am I aware of the difference of this song from the last waltz? Do I notice that it is slower? Am I aware that when I say 1-2-3, I say it in a robotic way?” But if I sing it, I notice that I move in a more fluid way. I MOVE TO THE MUSIC.

The concept of moving to the music is like listening to what a person is saying. Instead of repeating steps like a formula from our repertoire of knowledge or rejecting the music because we hate what we don’t know, we sense our way into the steps that fit the musical phrase. The theory is simple, but in practice, it is one of the more complicated elements in a couple relationship. Most of the couples in the years I have practiced arrive in my office because of their communication difficulties. They need help to reach beyond the content to detect the cadence and rhythm of their disagreements.

Meanwhile, Nancy and Bob are still fighting. They return to see me after a long drawn-out fight where Bob, it’s reported, was raging for hours, and Nancy couldn’t get a word in and therefore, felt she lost

her voice. Now she feels alienated from Bob. Bob feels that Nancy simply does not understand what pressure he is undergoing and he feels so misunderstood. Their style of arguing becomes a battle of actions ranging from dumping rage to withdrawing from oppression.



*Listening with our Bodies*

Max Sinitsa and Sophia d'Angelo

© Dancesport Photography by Alexander Rowan

I ask Nancy and Bob if they would be willing to participate in an experiment in my office. The experiment would require them to not talk but to sit near each other, far enough that they would not feel intruded upon but close enough so that they can feel the energy, or heat from each other's body. I asked if I could put on a waltz. As they listened to the music, I asked them to pay close attention to the sensations in their body. I asked them to agree upon one song of THEIR choice. They proceeded to listen to a few waltzes and came upon one that they both liked.

### *Connecting from hand to heart*

The music was playing. With their permission, I asked them to hold each other's hand. They agreed to experiment. I also let them know that at any time if this was too uncomfortable, for any reason, they could look to me and I would know that it was time to stop. Each agreed to respect the other and that stopping was a personal choice and one that needed to be respected.

I do believe that this was one of the first times when I saw both of them begin to relax. Their shoulders were no longer raised, their facial muscles relaxed. Bob was the first to have tears in his eyes. They reached for each other's hands and held them for the rest of the session.

When the music was finished I asked them to share their thoughts. What I heard from this therapy couple changed the way I worked with my patients from that day on. Bob and Nancy told me that what was most profound for them was the quiet and the feeling of holding each other's hand. It also changed the way I danced! It brought home for me what happens to me when I am holding the hands of any of my dance partners. It is a wordless communication that gives security and direction. Whether hot or cold the touch of the hand is honest and truthful. It does not have history in it but it is a communication of the moment. In dancing it sends signals of lead and follow, push and pull,

in this direction or that, strongly or softly. As for Bob, he felt he could feel Nancy's heart beat and her softness. Nancy felt Bob's fear and his hurt as well. The journey for them changed from that day on.

How do we stay authentic and honest and true to who we are in a relationship and in our dance partnership, acknowledge what we feel and let it show? Musicality is stored in our body memory and therefore in the way we move. We do not strive to dance the emotion of the music, rather we find that it is there in our body as we move to the music. We all store feelings. Music can elicit those feelings, which affects our movements in a personally authentic way. If we dance a step "sadly" because the words in the song tell us it is a sad song, then our movement is simply contrived and unnatural. It is similar to someone saying, "I am sorry" but not meaning it. Their true feeling is betrayed in the tone or cadence of their voice or the tenor of their body. Facial expression to convey emotion instead of whole body response to music and partner are similar to false fronts in a relationship. We want to be real and authentic when we dance, and when we relate to our intimate partner.

## CHAPTER 8

# DRIVING AND TRAFFIC CONTROL

**B**allroom dancing, in all its styles (American Smooth, American Rhythm, International Standard and International Latin) has one core theme that runs through it. That is that the man is the driver and the woman is the engine. For same sex couples the driver wouldn't necessarily be a man. So in that case we would say that the lead is the driver and the follow is the engine. In the world of competitive ballroom dancing, the man is synonymous with the lead. But seriously, I can't say it often enough. This is just a convention. What happens between the driver and the engine (whoever they may be) is what interests me as a couple therapist.

### *Driver and Engine*

It was described to me many years ago in these words, "The woman is the engine, and the engine is always running. It does not stop, but the driver of the car directs it. The man is in charge of the speed, the timing, and the direction." Controlling a well-tuned engine so that the car moves well is not as easy as a man might wish. When you are a woman dancing with a man who is not a good driver, who is not seasoned at the sport, the rule becomes confusing instead of routine, ill-defined instead of clear, and therefore not supportive to man and

woman alike. In that case the car is a clunker. But I am dancing with three men who know how to get the best out of the engine, when to speed up or slow down, where to go, and when to shift. It is like being in a Lamborghini, and it seems as if it is self-driving.

### *Being in charge, being responsible*

The fact that the man is in charge of timing—and I want to be very clear about this —DOES NOT mean that the woman is not also in charge. She is in charge of her sense of timing and direction. She is aware of this when moving backwards at the direction of the man. She is even more aware of her contribution to direction when the man leads her to move forward while he moves backwards unable to see the dancers behind him. In terms of timing, this is where it becomes tricky. As I said, both partners are responsible for themselves, but in the ballroom world there must be a leader. It is an agreed upon understanding. I find this underlying rule quite reassuring. Partnerships are fraught with misunderstandings and complexity already. If there is a rule then it takes the pressure off of whoever is in charge of what jobs. But that leader must also appreciate and rely on the follower on those occasions when the follower contributes critically to their movement. The agreed rule does shift subtly at times by unspoken agreement. Once again, this is not to say that the woman in the partnership does not choreograph, or change the timing of steps and sequences when they are creating a piece or working it out. But, when you're competing there must be this clear rule that the man is then the driver, most especially in a pro-am relationship. You have to be able to move at speed around a crowded floor, no ifs, ands or buts.

When this rule runs smoothly, one can only imagine how well the partnership, on the floor, manages the competition. However, we are talking about myriad personalities, mixtures of communication and listening styles, and complexities of strength and attitude. The rule may not be used in a responsible manner by the leader, or may not be



received in an open-minded way by the follower. There may be no room for give. Then it is no longer a rule but a recipe for disaster.

### *Flexible versus toxic relationships*

The ballroom relationship is no different than any other relationship in the world. We can have loving, open-minded, flexible, compromising, and sharing relationships that communicate mostly well and are able to manage and navigate in a fairly reasonable or even highly developed way. And then, we have relationships that are toxic, where the partners are rigid and unable to communicate, and their moods are volatile and labile. The ballroom industry is filled with a rainbow of personalities and styles of teaching that brings forth a rich variety of possible creative combinations, but this does require cultural humility as the partners work together to understand and accept each other's style within the conventions of the ballroom. If not, culture clash contributes to the demise of a partnership.

I began ballet lessons at the age of five in Chicago. More often than not my teachers were women who came from an Eastern Bloc country and were trained by the best in their homeland. Their experience of discipline in childhood was harsher than that of most American children of that era. I learned at a very young age to be obedient and disciplined, to listen and do what I was told. It was not unheard of for my ballet teacher to walk around the room with a long stick in her hand and when she would notice that a student's feet were not turned out enough or their legs were not straight enough, she might use that stick gently to tap or not so gently to slap the students' legs. We learned to fix the issue very quickly that way. This teaching method was not frowned upon or even confronted. It was what it was, and it certainly created a disciplined young person.

Exposed to this method of teaching to ensure learning, I became accustomed to being taught, to listening to the instructor, and giving the instructor all the authority. For me, it was understood and in some

ways, actually, quite freeing. There was no ambiguity. But when it crosses a line, or when a child is vulnerable to feeling shamed, or fights back, it can become a perfect breeding ground for abuse.

I say this about my childhood ballet training. I want to be clear that no one in the ballroom industry has ever abused me or done anything physically harmful in any way to me, nor have I ever heard of that happening amongst other teachers and students. The absolute majority of these teachers are hardworking, honest, very caring and supportive to their students. Most of us pro-am students feel grateful, and cared for by our partners and teachers and coaches. We know that they work very hard to earn their money, love what they do, and have to manage a complicated set of personalities while also trying to meet the goals their students have asked them to meet. However, on occasion, like in all relationships, it can go wrong.

I speak about this because it is critical to understand when to leave a relationship. As I mentioned, we are in relationships with dancers from other cultures besides ours and in different age ranges. We meet a dancer whose performance style is outstanding and we decide to partner with him although we don't know him as well as we should. It is not unlike going on a date once or twice, but then deciding to move in with the person. In the case of committed dance partners, we travel together, compete together, eat together, and spend weekends on the road. We practice intensively during the weeks that we are not competing. This is not only a close relationship but a dependent one as well. The student is dependent on the teacher to teach her and help her reach her goals. The student has entered into a financial commitment with her partner. Some teachers take on many students and others prefer to keep it to a minimum training just one or a few. All in all, it can be complicated.



*Trusting*

Max Sinitza and Sophia d'Angelo

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## *Loving and leaving the teacher*

If the relationship is one where the teacher believes in the old way of teaching, similar to my ballet teachers, teaching with a stick, so to speak, and the student is not accustomed to that way of teaching, then the relationship is fraught with problems. As I mentioned earlier, the goals and the lives of teacher and student in pro-am relationships can become intricately intertwined. In my experience, it has felt like I am dancing with a man who is not only protecting me on the dance floor, watching for the oncoming traffic, and looking out for me as a competitor but who also shares his life's ups and downs. Competing brings out raw emotions, frustrations, and love for each other as we try to reach the goal of winning together. I think it is not unlike the feeling of loving the teacher or nanny who is not a family member but has a commitment to see you do well and achieve what you have worked hard for. We compete to be our best selves, and in doing so we also represent our teachers on the floor. That, in and of itself, adds pressure to both student and teacher. So when the pressure becomes unmanageable, the relationship can become toxic. Then we have to face the painful fact that it may be better for both of us to end the partnership. How do we leave it? And how do we get over the pain and disappointment?

I have had two past teachers in my ten years as a pro-am ballroom dancer. Both times, when I left, I felt as if I had lost a part of myself. I became accustomed to having both of these teachers in my life, but I knew that the time had come to end it. I felt that I could no longer tolerate their styles of teaching. As the song says, breaking up is hard to do, and a tough endeavor I do not want to repeat too many times in my life.

### *Patricia and Katy: Driving or running over?*

Patricia and Katy had been in a relationship for ten years. They worked long hours at a law firm and were quite accomplished at a young age. They were in their early thirties and wanted very much to be married

and have a family. Patricia had agreed to be the parent who would bear a child and so they set out, intent on finding a donor, with whose help they would build a family. But there was a problem. They felt that because of their disagreements, their relationship was doomed. They came to me, both of them hoping that I could somehow save their relationship from the certain demise they felt was in their future, at the same time planning to become a family.

Patricia came from a culture of hard working, boots-on-the-ground workers on a cattle farm. She understood what it was like to get up early before the sun would rise to milk the cows, feed the chickens, and take care of multiple barn chores. Life was difficult when she was growing up, and her father was a harsh task master. Patricia would often share that her father had very little patience for complaints. Her school work needed to be completed at night and her chores finished in the morning. There was little time for a social life. When she did go out as an adolescent, her father was reticent to let her go with anyone unless there was a chaperone. He was a harsh disciplinarian and often would hit her if she had been shirking. She learned to obey and as she said, “duck and dodge.”

Katy grew up in a middle class family in the suburbs of a large city. She went to a private school and had many comforts in life. She was raised by her mother and had a very close relationship with her until her recent death at an early age. Katy felt alone and was searching for a companion. She felt that Patricia was a good partner because she was capable, strong and able to manage the complexities of hard work and hard play.

Patricia and Katy appeared on the surface to be a loving couple capable of managing their differences. They would often have disagreements in my office but as we worked through them they seemed to be able to use responsible words and a caring tone. So why were they struggling? They both wanted to make this relationship a long term one, they had the skills to work out their problems, so why did they feel they were at a crossroads? As usual, I proceeded to wait

and watch and listen to the emotional undertones of the relationship. I listened for what was not being said rather than just what was being said in the room. In the therapy sessions with Patricia and Katy, often I detected a tone that was something less than patient from Patricia with a hint of sarcasm. In response to this, Katy became quieter and less able to communicate. As the months progressed and they both felt greater ease in the room I was able to witness their difficulties in a yet clearer way. What had not been shared in the therapy room early on was that Patricia was often demeaning and condescending to Katy. Katy said that she tended to excuse Patricia, saying that she wasn't being cruel, she was just short-tempered from a long day at work, and just needed time to relax and eat dinner and then all would be fine.



*Combustible*

Nikolai Pilipenchuk and Sophia d'Angelo

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It was late on a Sunday afternoon when I was checking my messages that I received a call from Katy. She sounded frantic and

confused. She asked that I call immediately and I did. What I learned was that Patricia had been verbally abusive to Katy and had thrown a plate at her. The plate sliced an artery in her arm and she ran in to the bathroom to call 911. When the ambulance arrived they determined that this had been a domestic violence incident and arrested Patricia.

Katy had said that Patricia and she always had an underlying understanding: Patricia was really the leader and Katy the follower. They liked these roles and each played them fairly well. Unfortunately, the rules of the relationship became quite rigid. Patricia was threatened as Katy became more capable of asserting her needs. The driver of the relationship, so to speak, was unable to accommodate any other's input into direction and timing. Patricia felt threatened by Katy's burgeoning independence. I learned that Patricia had forbidden Katy to ever bring into our sessions any mention of the type of arguments that they had at home. In this couple there was an agreed upon rule as to who was directing and driving but that there was no flexibility in this rule. When Katy asserted herself, Patricia became more demanding and increased her directive nature. The combination became combustible until it turned into a physical manifestation as domestic violence.

### *Moving on*

Once again, I was led to the terms of the ballroom. I began to think of the concept of the driver. It came to my attention that not only is the driver in charge of direction, but also deals with traffic control. In other words, when you are the driver you must also be the eyes and ears for the other who is unable to see. This means that whoever is going forward is in charge of protecting the couple from harm. Harm in the ballroom world on the floor during the competition could be anything from falling or tripping over your partner, to almost colliding with another couple, and having to stop and change direction. I, unfortunately, have fallen several times. As I have often said,

ballroom dancing with a partner as like a three-legged sack race. You are moving in complete unison and if you are out of time or off step it is likely that one or both could fall. On one occasion, early on, I happened to trip on the hem of my dress. I remember the feeling of knowing that I was going down. To fall when you are competing and having all eyes on you can be bruising not only to your body but to your ego. In this moment, the man I was dancing with watched me fall and said, “Good job!” Was he trying to make a joke of a catastrophe? Was he mocking me? Anyway I did not find it helpful at the bruising moment. Nonetheless, I had to get up and continue, and I did. For some odd reason, I excused his behavior and blamed myself for being so truly stupid that I fell. It wasn’t until later that I realized how unnecessary that remark was and how demeaned I felt. It is a measure of our admiration and dependency that we can explain away another person’s behavior as inevitable, align ourselves with it, and believe that it is what we deserve. Just because the man is the driver on whose lead the woman relies, it does not mean that she gives up her independent read of every situation the couple encounters.

As the driver in their relationship, Patricia had a moment of failure in taking care of Katy. Traffic control was handed over to police that night. I asked Katy what she remembered about the argument that ended with Patricia at this point of total loss of control. I already knew that Patricia was often demeaning with Katy, and now I found out that she was overly possessive as well. On the evening of the crisis, Patricia had found Katy texting someone. Patricia became enraged and jealous and accused Katy of seeing another woman. That is when the fight ensued. Katy shared that Patricia had been abused by her father for a very long time and that she thought that Patricia was cruel to her because it was all she had known in family life. Katy said she had felt that Patricia thought that being harsh was part of being loving and so she had excused it. On this day, she no longer believed it was excusable. Katy and Patricia agreed to see me the following week.





*The Struggle*

Nikolai Pilipenchuk and Sophia d'Angelo

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What I believed occurred in their relationship was not unlike what happens with some couples in a working/dancing partnership. What do we do when something that we know is not healthy must end? How can we dare to confront it? How can we look at our own contribution to the problem? How do we manage the loss and the pain? And how do we interpret the loss and recover from the void? What might we be afraid of when we know that the relationship must end? Will we be alone? Can we manage the loneliness? What did we miss, and why did we miss the signs? If we gave ourselves roles in that relationship were they too rigid and can we change directions and roles?

Returning to Patricia and Katy, I worked with them to try to understand their agreed roles and their unspoken rules about those roles. I wondered with them where they might be able to be less rigid. How did Katy get to the point where Patricia was able to push beyond the physical boundary and hurt her? The couple was embedded in a dynamic in which Patricia's role of always directing the relationship left Katy in a vulnerable position following too literally, almost blindly, and with no opportunity for input, which set up a toxic environment. When Katy began to push back, that was when Patricia felt she needed to reassert her strength. They worked many months on this issue. It emerged that Patricia was unwilling to shift her role and would never rely on Katy to direct at times. The end of the relationship was inevitable and my job became one of helping them come to terms with the loss and face the inevitable void to come. Presiding over failed hope is not a job that the couple therapist accepts willingly, but sometimes we have to accept that ending the relationship is the best outcome, and help the couple to do it well.

## CHAPTER 9

# COMPETITION

Competition is all around us. In a dancing partnership or a romantic couple, competition culminates in bringing two people together in a dynamic relationship, whether it is platonic or intimately engaged. There is still competition all around, whether it is identified or hidden—competing to be selected as a partner, to remain a viable couple, to do well together, and to be the best couple on the floor. There is competition in the minds of others outside the couple whether in the dance studio and competition field or in the family and community. Fantasies ensue fueled by longing, desire, envy and jealousy. All these aspects of competition are manifest in the relationship, and how they are handled is critical to the success of the partnership.

### *Competing on the dance floor*

The way in which competitive ballroom dance partners compete is unique to that couple, just as the way a couple interacts with the therapist is unique to that couple and that therapist. They create a relationship that is larger than the contributions of each participant. The nature of the therapeutic relationship is based not only on the couple therapist's mind honed as a therapeutic instrument but also on

the fit between her personality and that of the couple she is treating. The couple therapist, like the dancer, needs technique and sensitivity. Johanna Arenaza, the psychoanalyst-former ballet dancer whom I mentioned in the Introduction, wrote, “Technique must be readily available, and yet its presence unnoticed. Otherwise it inhibits authenticity, the essence of the dance and therapeutic cure.” She also captures the point I want to make: Although technique is important in conveying the quality of a dance and a therapeutic intervention, the use of the personality and the ability to relate is of equal importance. True for the success of the competitive dancer and for the effectiveness of the therapist. As Dr. Arenaza put it, “When dance is mastered, it is less a performance and much more a personal communication—one that transforms, informs, and confronts the aspects of oneself unknown until that moment. Similarly effective treatment goes beyond words and symptom relief as one transcends to a sense of feeling understood, healed, empowered.”

I hope I have made the point that the preparation and presentation of a dance couple is based not only on early training, current training, developing technique, and teamwork but also on their personalities, individual likes and dislikes, and response to pressures within and outside the couple. Recognizing these elements together is part and parcel of the art of competing and how they are dealt with contributes to success or failure.

It is a unique and brave endeavor to compete against other couples on the ballroom floor. I compete with three different men for three different styles of dance. Each man has his own style of competing, and so I am different in each partnership.

Our style and talent and abilities are all on display at the same time and are being evaluated as we move. In those ninety minutes allocated to each dance style, we are being evaluated on our movement as a couple, our technical mastery as a couple and as individuals, our style, our look, musicality, timing, and likability. This could create tremendous anxiety.

A few rules that I have found successful for me are to:

- 1) Never look at my competitors.
- 2) Believe in myself from the moment we walk on the floor no matter what happens.
- 3) Never show fear or lack of confidence.
- 4) Stay connected to my partner at all times and when in doubt, stay connected visually.

Of these points, I would say that the most important element that also applies to couples in daily life is to have faith in yourself and in your couple. To believe in the process and the work it takes to manage your relationship.

But what I have learned about competing has NOT been from my successes, but rather from my failures. The moments that did not go well are the moments I carry with me to the winner's podium at the next event. They teach me what not to do.

Some of the most difficult moments I will share. I do believe that they are mirrored in my other relationships over the years. A very wise coach of mine once asked me, "What do you do when you make a mistake mid-dance?" I offered up that I will be upset with myself and can sometimes still be upset at myself while continuing on. I admitted that I hold that fear for the next time I am about to take that same step but now have a vision of myself repeating the mistake. He replied, "Yes. I can see that. I see that after the mistake the rest of the dance looks tentative and as if you are apologizing." My partner often tells me that he can feel my body begin to lock up before I have even done the step that is coming up. I know it's because I'm aware that the next step is hard and so I am there ahead of myself; as a result I am also too tense for the step I am currently taking. The end result is not only a failed attempt at the future step but a tentative or stiff action with the current step before the hard one.

I listened to what both my partner and my coach were telling me and I likened it to my relationship outside the dance couple. I saw that

there are often times when the anxiety of what I might hope would happen and what actually does happen between my husband and me sets us up for failure. The assumption that either he or I will not be able to produce the desired result can then cause a chain reaction of missteps and miscommunication.



*Anticipation*

Nikolai Pilipenchuk and Sophia d'Angelo

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## *The other, the competition*

The goal of competing in dance is not only to win the medal or the title. Inherent in it is that I am competing for my partner's interest in dancing with me, hoping to maintain his interest in me and mine in him. I see other couples dancing and I notice their skill level and what type of relationship they have. I wonder, how does that compare to our relationship? I see the look of the other women and men, and I am aware of the fear that my partner will chose to go to another, better dancer or more beautifully presented woman. These thoughts undermine confidence and this is why I invoke rule number 1—never look at my competitors—when I am on the competition floor. The self-doubts that arise for the dancing couple are quite common, and equally likely in the couple in an intimate relationship.

### *Ben and Sarah: Dealing with a rival*

Ben and Sarah walked into my office. Sarah, the person who initiated the visit, appeared quiet and sullen. She chose to sit on the farthest part of the couch, a good distance from Ben. Ben looked as if knew why he was called in to my office and what was coming next. I was soon to learn that Sarah had found a text from his old girlfriend about making a date to meet for lunch. I asked them what brought them to my office. It was Ben who began: “Sarah believes that I am not faithful. She found a text that I responded to from an old girlfriend asking me to lunch. My response was to tell her that I wasn't able to meet this week but could look at the next week. Sarah has assumed that I have already met with her and that I have been unfaithful. I told her that it was true that she texted me but that I didn't have an interest in meeting her but was trying to find a way out of it by putting it off. But Sarah is determined to see that I am lying and our arguments have become mean and really disturbing since that happened.”

Sarah quickly responded to him. “I have spent nights imagining what it would be like for you to get back together with her. I have lost faith in our relationship and now see you as a liar which makes you someone I would never want to be with.” The threat of competition had invaded their relationship. That can only happen because of vulnerability.

In that moment, I had a flashback of the moment I had mis-stepped in my dancing. I remembered the various feelings. What was wrong with me that I couldn’t do this simple step and do it well? What did my dance partner contribute to the problem? Was it me or was it him? And now that I had less confidence in my ability to hold that combination together, would I have less faith in us? Would I see myself as less capable or less desirable and therefore my partner would choose a better dancer? And now that I have this lack of confidence, does it permeate throughout my dancing and render me less apt to complete the steps with accuracy? And finally, what toll did it take on our relationship if in fact I am now more focused on my errors and less “in it”, so to speak. And if I see myself as less capable and less desirable will that make me feel less secure in my relationships?

### *Chasing doubt to stay present*

So I thought about a few things that my partner and my coach said to me to help me. They both said that falling into those moments of fear and self-doubt means that I am not present in the moment. I am ahead of myself—wondering, worrying about how often this will happen, asking myself if I am good enough, rather than focusing on what was currently happening and getting past the misstep that happened and cannot now be fixed, letting it go as something in the past. When we are reconnected to each other, present in our bodies after the connection has been broken in the misstep, we are even more in tune to each other and can re-establish the bond, which we now value even more highly as one that is resilient.



And so I offered my thoughts to the couple. I said that Ben had reassured us that he had not met his old girlfriend and, given that he came here today to work through this with Sarah, he had showed, at least, a desire to want to repair. The threat of loss has made it clear to Sarah that being in the relationship, being present in therapy, and hearing Ben now, are important. Facing fear together makes the relationship even more valuable than before. The threat the old girlfriend poses to Sarah also comes from Sarah's self-doubt about herself. Is she worthy? Is she lovable? Is she worth the fight? As time went on I did see that Ben was very engaged in making sure that Sarah felt secure. I also saw how much their insecurity (her vulnerable self-worth; his difficulty in directly refusing the request of his ex-girlfriend) played on the future of their relationship and of their communications. Each had self-doubt or worry that encompassed them and shed darkness over how they moved within their dance as a couple. As soon as Sarah began to hear Ben, be in the present with him, recognize how engaged and committed he actually was, each of them began to relax and enjoy their relationship as a secure base.

### *On winning or not*

Competitions, of course, are concerned with winning or losing. We can liken this in a couple relationship to being Chosen or Not Chosen. When we say win or lose, chosen or not, we also mean that when one loses, someone else wins. Losing feels horrible, but we have to keep competing in the next round looking for a win. And when we win, we remember that someone else loses and that feels horrible to them. In the world of dating, there is even more anxiety about winning and losing, and a whole life riding on it. I am thinking of a young woman who went on many dates with a young man who was very attentive and attracted to her. So she was reassured by his interest, responded with confidence, and broke down her walls of privacy and initial reticence. It was late enough in the new relationship for the woman to

feel secure that this was going to be someone she would be with, until one day, he told her that he was still in love with his ex-girlfriend and that perhaps he had started dating too soon. Thank you but no thank you, and that was that.

This scenario is not new and perhaps it is no longer shocking in these days of ghosting. However, it still quite hard for the woman or man who is not chosen. It is equally hard to go into competition as the crowd favorite with a partner telling you that you are dancing so well, only to find out that not only you did not win but rather came in 5th out of 6. It doesn't line up with expectations or perceptions, we might say. I've been fortunate to have my share of wins, and so I came to a major international competition as the favorite. I felt that I danced better than ever, and my teacher confirmed that. But I came in second to a woman that I thought danced rather stiffly, and my teacher confirmed that impression. But most of the judges put her first. What do we do with this information? We concluded that the judges in that country preferred her style of dance.

### *Managing defeat*

How was I to manage my loss? How would I pick up from this defeat and smile for the next round of competitions? After a fall, how quickly do we dust off our knees and dance again? Once again, I turned to my partner, with tears in my eyes and asked him how to go on after this loss that I had thought was mine to win. He very smartly said, "Not winning it should give you the desire to go back out there and prove to yourself that you are a winner. But, also, it cannot always be about winning. It is about how you feel you did. Was it good dancing? Yes it was. That is what matters. Sometimes you can win, with what you know was not your best dancing — and that doesn't feel so good inside either. It's about learning how to get up when you fall. It's not IF you fall, it's WHEN you fall and HOW you manage it. THAT is what makes a winner."

I found his words so meaningful. How often I have now said some version of those words to couples in therapy! And in the case of the young couple, the young woman has to understand that being chosen or not cannot define whether she is worthy or not. She could blame the young man for dumping her, but what good would that do? Better to acknowledge that he was unable to resolve his ambivalence, acknowledge the hurt, and move ahead, knowing that there are other chances. Learning from false starts and missteps makes you that much wiser and that much more capable and strong for the competition on the floor and in life.

## CHAPTER 10

# LIFE, SEX, AND DEATH ANXIETY

**T**raining to be a dancer at a young age has myriad psychological, emotional and physical ramifications. It requires discipline from the start and ongoing resilience and commitment. As I spent countless years and days training, first as a ballet dancer and then as a lyrical, modern dancer, and finally as a ballroom dancer, I experienced numerous times where I felt I had hit my limit. The hours of practice, the critical and sometimes less than constructive criticism, the broken bones, the pulled ligaments and tendons, the calluses, blisters, sore muscles, bruised egos, adrenaline rushes, and the physical limits of breath and stamina all are part of the dancer's life. I think it is safe to say that, in many ways, the elements required to be a successful dancer are also what it takes to be in and make a relationship successful. It is also what it takes to weather the storms and appreciate the pleasures of raising children. But with having children comes the anxiety of protecting their health and well-being.

I have spent the last twenty-eight years mothering my children, caring about them, protecting them, sharing their achievements and losses. Some of the greatest joys in my life have been watching them, both from a distance and up close while snuggled in my arms, my eyes gazing into theirs. I remember, as a first-time mother, looking into my newborn daughter's eyes and nervously wondering how to protect her

from the germs I was told were lurking all around her. I recall holding my second daughter, mentally debating the best ways to guide her and instill in her a strong foundation. And I remember holding my son's hand while walking in a park, wondering how to protect him from others who might hurt him and how to teach him to be a thoughtful man one day. But I knew these were largely wishes, hopes, and dreams, and that it was a fallacy to believe I was truly capable of protecting them. I knew, intellectually at least, all I could do was hold them when life was not fair, and rejoice with them when life bestowed them goodies. As my children grew, I marveled at their independence but saw their continuing need to keep me within earshot at all times. I wept at times when my eldest experienced her first real disappointment at not getting the part in the ballet she wanted; when my middle child told me her friends had decided they no longer wanted to talk to her; or when my youngest shared the news that he was not picked for any sports teams at school. All of these experiences, I was told, would be my battle scars to wear as a parent.

During the three years I spent studying for my Master's Degree in Social Work, I became acutely aware of our human frailties and vulnerabilities. But I also saw firsthand how resilient and remarkable people can be. I watched and listened carefully during all the lectures about mental illness, posttraumatic stress disorder, grieving loss, and attachment disorders. I counseled high school students and adults while they revealed their most personal thoughts, expressed their greatest fears, and shared horrific losses. I did this with as much compassion as I believe I had. I knew that to be a good therapist I would need to call upon my own experiences of loss and my own tools for strength. But nothing prepared me for the moment when I learned that my youngest child, my son, had a rare form of bone cancer.

## *Death anxiety*

My son was eight years old at the time he was diagnosed with Adamantinoma. We were told that he had a very early stage of cancer and that outcomes are often very good at that stage if the tumor is radically removed from inside the bone. To do this, the doctor would have to replace his bone with a donated bone, an allograft. Surgery was to be scheduled immediately and would last five hours. Our life, as we knew it, had changed in that moment and would now include years of medical tests and doctor's appointments. My husband and I garnered support from family and friends and pulled all our resources, both financially and emotionally, from every bank we had.

The mind is a remarkable thing given what it allows you to remember in the moments of trauma. I remember the smell of the hospital room where he was prepped for surgery and the wonderful nurses who handled my son as if they, too, were his mother. As I watched the hands of the clock tick, unfairly quickly it seemed, my husband and I were escorted into the surgical room. (I felt like a prisoner on death row, walking to her demise.) I held my son's head while my husband held his body and within moments our son was fast asleep.

As I walked out to the waiting room, I finally understood what I had once read: that our children are not ours to keep. Children may come through us to be guided but are separate beings with their own destiny and their own plan. At that moment, I understood on an intimate level that I was incapable of truly protecting him, or my daughters for that matter.

My husband and I spent eight days in the ICU of Georgetown Hospital. As the daughter of a physician, I have always had a tremendous respect for both doctors and nurses. But now, having seen them in action 24/7 while they cleaned, prepped, and soothed their young patients with their comforting voices, I realized that they too were there to protect my son. Together, we would do the best we could.

I saw the faces of other parents holding on for dear life and the social workers whose smiles and warm embraces gave them some hope.

I am happy to say that our son is well and our family intact. But as our daughter put it so succinctly, “Life will never be the same for us. The look and the feel of our family have changed.” Although we are all still together, we hold on to each other just a bit more tightly, all the while knowing in our hearts that all we really can do for one another is share our love and hope that each day we are aware of the precious gifts we receive from one another.

Similar to a dancer’s life and the toll it takes, our family relationships, at times, stretch us to our physical and mental limits, requiring stamina and fortitude. Our couple relationships can confront us with our desires, our needs, our hunger and thirst for connection, and can be a window into who we are as sensual and sexual beings. So too, can we explore these aspects of ourselves in a partnered dance. In most dances there are the elements of romance, passion, and sensuality. At times it can be confronting and eye opening for male or female dancer if we are open to self-reflection about ourselves and how we portray these elements of sensuality as we relate with our partner.

### *Sexual anxiety*

Sometimes the physicality and emotionality of partnered dance makes us feel anxious about our sexuality. You remember from Chapter 1, Michael with whom I dance in theatre arts? To elaborate, Theatre Arts is a lyrical modern partnered dance with complicated lifts, in air jumps, catches and spins that are balletic, gymnastic or aerial. Either way the success of the lift relies on timing, eye connection (so we know we are both ready), position of the hands, and seamless body to body contact. As I began learning this style of dance I realized that Michael would have to hold and touch almost every part of my body. We are completely intertwined! Of course this connection is essential.

The sheer physicality of it and the necessity of physical contact has the appearance, perhaps, of a very intimate connection. I soon realized that this could not have been farther from the truth. It was a scientifically constructed arrangement, devoid of sexual feeling, at least for me and my experience with him, a man I trust. My right hand reaches out to touch his left hand at which point he lifts me and I need to move my legs up and over his head to then roll down his body so that he can catch my other leg. There are mishaps and falls and do-overs. It is not sensual: It is just work! Work on getting the mechanics right. He gets a better hold on me next time, and my timing gets better. The bodily connection, his touch, are purely functional, essential to the final artistic communication. But make no mistake. As Dr. Arenaza tells it, “What appears to be an ethereal jump or a casual observation, is the fruition of countless hours of inner strengthening of body and mind.”

*Linda and Thomas: Missed connections*

Linda and Thomas were referred to me by a colleague who was moving away and closing her practice. It is not always easy for people to lose their therapists and especially when they have created a bond with them, opened up to them, and revealed the complexity of their feelings and relationships. I understood this from the first session with Linda and Thomas, and so I began slowly. It was not until five or six weeks in to our weekly sessions that I was aware that Thomas had been caught by Linda while he was using the internet to participate in sex chat rooms. When Linda learned of Thomas’ interest in the sex chat rooms, she expressed her shock and her feelings of betrayal. Thomas, on the other hand, felt that his use of the chat rooms did not constitute a betrayal at all, given that he was not actually with the women. He regarded himself as merely a voyeur while participating in online sex, which he saw as innocent.

Thomas and Linda worked for many months with me and each other on the question of what was a violation of their marital contract.



What Thomas was saying, essentially, was that being physically connected yet emotionally detached was not a betrayal. He was able to experience physical pleasure without physical contact or emotional connection. Thomas felt that in no way did he break a promise, given that he was not intimately or physically involved with any of the women but instead just used these chat rooms for purely sexual release rather than intimacy. Linda, on the other hand, felt that any sort of sex without her was a breach of their marriage.

### *Changing concepts of fidelity*

This is a very new world we are all experiencing, in terms of fidelity and infidelity. How are we to think about it? How do the laws of the marriage contract apply here? Having sought consultation from a colleague, I listened to Thomas and wondered about his description of his encounters with the online sex chat rooms. What was he doing in these encounters? Was he so detached and narcissistic that he no longer needed emotional connection and could, possibly, engage in these acts without experiencing them at all as infidelity? Does it even matter in this case? If Linda feels it is a breach, then isn't that the final answer? What constitutes infidelity? Is touching another person while married an automatic boundary violation? Is a violation only a breach if one person deems it so? My work with couples is not about being a moral or ethical guide, but rather a sounding board for them. So I do not chime in on wrong or right.

As I have mentioned earlier, I often reflect on myself in the process of working with couples and individuals to gain an insight into their world. Thinking about Thomas's roleplaying on the internet, I noted that I, too, was capable of engaging in an "as if" scenario. I began to think about doing lifts with Michael in Theatre Arts. If we are physically connected with our partner and at times even appear to be sexually attracted, is that breaking a boundary? Like Thomas I am acting as if I am a person longing for or loving someone outside my

marriage. Unlike Thomas, in my situation as a dancer I actually am in full physical contact with a man who is not my husband. It is not virtual. And I am emotionally connected to him. I do not detach. That might sound like more of a betrayal than the one Thomas is accused of! But there is a major difference. It is not a sexual situation and it is not at all hidden. The most successful performers are those who keep the boundaries of their roles and commitments to their life partners, and within that safe context fully use their physical and emotional connection as a dance couple to give the other, the audience, a very real experience of the emotion they are trying to portray.



*All's well that ends well*

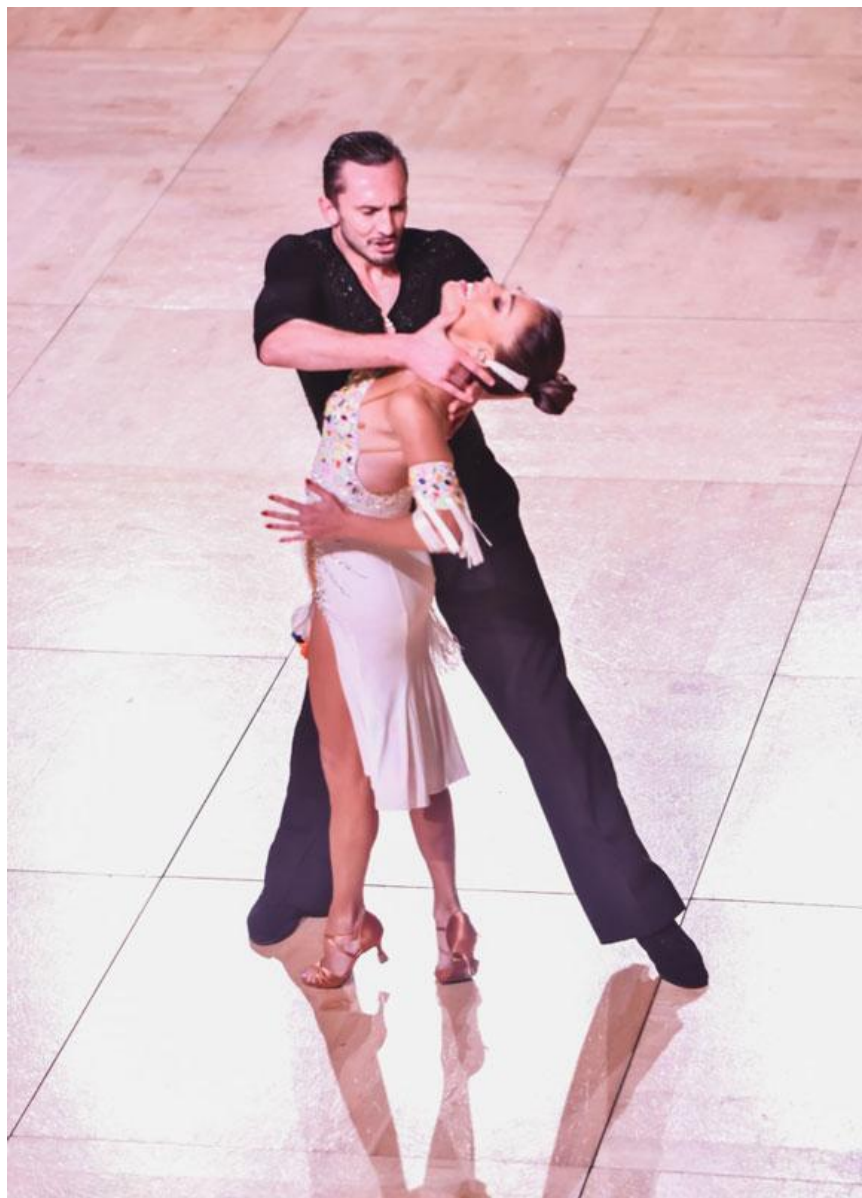
Nikolai Pilipenchuk and Sophia d'Angelo

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But what were the boundaries of Thomas and Linda's marriage and why did they view them differently? Was Thomas breaking an agreement he had with Linda, or did their agreement not cover this situation? When Thomas was physically connected (albeit virtually) while maintaining that he was emotionally detached from the woman on the internet he was also emotionally distant to Linda. How was it

better to be emotionally detached from the other women, as he claimed? What constitutes law-breaking in a marriage? I certainly am not the one to decide anything on this point and will let the couple decide what is right for them. As they spoke at great length of their boundaries and their tolerance it became clear that Thomas's need to find women in the chat rooms was a much more significant factor in the dynamics of their marriage than the act itself. In couple therapy over time, we realized that Thomas's justification for not being deemed unfaithful, namely his ability to connect sexually to a virtual woman without emotion, was related to an inability to feel connected on a deep level with Linda, with himself. I guessed it had to do with some element of trauma not acknowledged in his family, but Thomas could not connect to that possibility. He struggled mightily to explain and justify his need to relate to these women without any emotional connection.

As we went on, he realized that he thought of Linda as a family woman, not a wife. He said he had separated her from being the intimate partner of his sexual being and relegated her to a functional domestic partnership. This was a major insight, and a hopeful moment from which change might have been possible. I said that in being with Linda, physically but not wholly, and in being with the internet women not physically but only virtually, he was always in the presence of absence where intimacy and sexuality were concerned. I hoped we could look at the reason for Thomas's preferring the "presence of absence." Joan Raphael-Leff gave a lecture about this. She said that when a parent cannot acknowledge a traumatic loss and pretends that "it was nothing" then that "nothingness" lives on in the child as a "presence of absence" in a time capsule from childhood. Subsequent events in adulthood, such as marriage, crack open the capsule and the original confusion spills out, unmodified by time's passage. But Thomas was unwilling to risk cracking it open. He would not look deeper into his attachment to the presence of absence, searching out women with whom he was not in a relationship. Sometimes as therapists we have to accept that choice. It is scary territory.



*Life, sex and death*

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## *“The unthought known”*

In his book *The Shadow of the Object* the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas talks about “the unthought known” which consists of the un-verbalized elements of our mind—things we don’t know about ourselves that cause pain, retreat, and slips. We work on these fragments in therapy where the therapist provides a caring relationship and a safe mental space for repeated exploration of anything and everything that comes to mind, until gradually the unthought known becomes known and therefore manageable. We also discover the unthought known in ballroom dance, where the dance teacher provides a caring relationship, a stable frame, and physical repetition, until all the elements I have been describing—being off time, out of step, feeling shy, too anxious to wait, too afraid of rejection, too caught up in our self to pay attention to the other—all become known and are transformed into a dance aesthetic. In Chapter 2, I mentioned Bollas’s idea that our first aesthetic is our experience of our mother’s way of caring for us in infancy in such a way that we are transformed by what is happening to our body and our mind in that earliest partnership. From then on we search for experiences that recall those early moments of bliss, looking for new aesthetic experience that will be transformational. I suggested to Thomas that that this is what he was looking for but he scoffed at that. I could only guess at the early trauma Thomas was compelled to relive in his current relationship to serial virtual women, because Thomas was unwilling to go there.

Ultimately Thomas continued that lifestyle rather than develop a more fully intimate relationship with Linda. Linda and Thomas were not able to come to an agreement on either the emotional or ethical complications of his internet habit. Linda felt that she had lost her trust in Thomas, and that without trust there was nothing to hold them together. The relationship was emotionally dead from that point on, and its demise was inevitable.

## *Loss or death*

The ballroom dance relationship is a precious gift. Nevertheless it asks us to withstand anxiety, injury and fear as we strive for resilience and strength, sustain excitement, and create art. We need to access our flexibility and reinvent ourselves to produce the results that we are looking for. From time to time ballroom dance stretches our partnership and ourselves to unknown areas, and when we hit a stalemate we must turn to outside coaches. The equivalent in life is to turn to a couple therapist. In dance as in life, the relationship may end prematurely due to injury, loss of commitment, preference for a new partner to fit a new stage of development, or divorce. Or it may run its full course, but inevitably ends in death of one or the other partner. Although this may seem quite fatalistic, it is an actuality. It is the presence of the absence that creates anxiety in the couple and in any relationship. We are either consciously or unconsciously aware that in each moment we are together there is also the moment when we will not be, either for a short period of time or forever. The reality of the end is what breathes life into the beginning and, hopefully, drives us to be the best we can be and get the most out of every moment of the ongoing relationship.

### *Lydia and Mike: Death of desire and its recovery after an affair*

I have spent countless sessions with couples who turn to a therapist in order to help them work through their various concerns in their sexual relationship. I am not a sex therapist, and have been very clear to my clients about this. I do not offer behavioral exercises for sexual dysfunction. Nevertheless discussion of sexual concerns is part and parcel of the work of the couple therapist because sex is integral to the success or the demise of a relationship. Lydia and Mike came to me with the concern that they were no longer communicating. They had always found that where they often found solace when their

relationship seemed to “hit a wall” was in their sex life. They felt that their communication through touch was a way to break down the walls of anger or frustration. They felt confident in their ability to share their feelings through touch. Recently, however, Lydia felt that Mike was hurrying through their love making, making it feel rushed and less passionate. She worried that perhaps their sexual relationship was no longer a viable solution in their communication efforts. Lydia wondered if, in fact, Mike was losing interest. Mike reported that he felt Lydia no longer was responding to him and his needs and that that contributed to him just moving through the motions. He, too, felt worry and concern that this would be the beginning of the end.



### Emotional Heavy Lifting

*Max Sinitsa and Tatiana Seliverstova*

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In my next session with Mike and Lydia I called on aspects of my theatre arts dance with Michael. I had just returned from practice that morning when Michael and I were working on various new lifts. They

required complete attention and a symbiotic interdependence. As we both know, there needs to be a sign of agreement that we are going to do a particular lift when we are moving through the piece. We both must understand where and when this will occur. Without the agreed sign—a nod or a glance or verbal agreement—it is dangerous. We must be in agreement. This is what allows for a synchronization of movement and therefore an effortless look. But it requires communication. Eye contact is key. As I listened to Mike and Lydia I wondered about their communication in bed. What signs were missing and what communication was ineffectual?

As work with Mike and Lydia progressed, I noticed that Lydia was strikingly different from one week to the next. She became increasingly anxious in our sessions, more defensive, and more and more withdrawn. Mike shared that Lydia actually no longer wanted to have sex with him and he was devastated. An argument ensued as to who was the cause of the distance. Mike stormed out of the room. Lydia and I sat for a few moments collecting ourselves, realizing that Mike had left the session in anger and was not coming back. I was getting ready to end the session. I was aware that Lydia appeared as if she wanted to stay and talk to me. If I were to have a session with Lydia it would be individual therapy for her, and Mike might feel I had aligned with her and he would never return to couple therapy. In my work with couples, I do not do individual therapy with one spouse. My “client” is the couple. At the moment I was about to explain this boundary to Lydia, she blurted out, “I am having AN AFFAIR!” Lydia was well aware that I could not hold this secret from Mike, nor could I continue to see them. I could not see only one person in the couple since my allegiance is to the couple and their relationship. After a few moments of discussion and decision making, Lydia agreed to tell Mike herself as long as I was in the room with them.

Mike and Lydia did return to see me, and she told him she had been seeing someone and would end it if Mike wanted to be with her. For weeks and months we were worked through the hurt and betrayal



and pain they both were experiencing. Looking more deeply into the meaning of the affair, it became clear that Lydia was afraid of losing her looks now that she was in her late thirties. Affairs often occur as a response to death anxiety. They feel good because they create a feeling of youth and excitement that shoos away the encroachment of aging and eventually death. Understanding the basis was essential. Now the work of rebuilding could begin.

We looked at it from the same vantage point as I discussed earlier in my work with Michael. How could I do my part in this delicate balance of shared physical responsibility with Michael unless we were both able to agree to abide by the rules, give and receive the signs, and work hard at creating an effortless lift? Mike and Lydia made the commitment to reunite and began to open up about their shared needs for sex. They wanted to feel that their desire was symbiotic and their timing right. They became able to wait for the sign that the other was ready. They had to build the mind and body connection that had been missing. After many months of work, Mike and Lydia were able to mourn the lost innocence of their original relationship, repair their bond, and move to a different, better, workable relationship.

### *Death of a partner*

Relationships in the Pro-Am ballroom partnership are like marriages. They run the gamut from successful dance couples who are singularly committed, travel and work together, argue and reconcile, love and hate, to couples in which they change partners for various reasons and dance partnerships that have turned into marriages. Without working to stay healthy and tend to the relationship any of them can break up and lead to divorce or death. In my current relationships with my three teachers, I experience a full range of emotions and experiences. However, each one is as important to me as the other one. I am as committed to our friendship as to our dancing. Each man brings something different to the relationship. There have been

misunderstandings and miscommunications. I worry about each of them as I would a family member. I often worry about the longevity of our work together as I am much older than the men I dance with. I have succumbed to some injuries which I worry will one day sideline me. The thought of not dancing with my partners and teachers lives in the back of mind at all times. I feel lucky and fortunate to have these three men working with me. Max and I often joke that he will one day wheel me out onto the ballroom, complete our competition, put me back in my wheel chair, and off we will go. Bittersweet thought! But what do we do with this presence of the absence and how do we manage the threat of death to the couple in dance and in life?

*Janet and Bill: Facing death, living each moment*

Janet and Bill entered my office on a cold, wintery day. The heat was not working well in my office, and I decided to let each of my clients know that they could cancel if they felt that being cold or uncomfortable would not be tolerable. Janet and Bill arrived on time, suitably bundled up. Janet was in her late seventies as was Bill. I had been seeing them for about four years. They came to me originally because they felt that there was no more “magic” in their relationship and that, although they were afraid to be alone, being together in a state of fighting and discontent was too much to bear. We worked diligently through the communication styles, the eye contact, and holding hands. We even had moments when I would put on music and they would stand up and move to the music in a ballroom hold, and for a time they took dance lessons at my suggestion. Over the years they learned to listen to each other better and to find ways to recreate their relationship. Today was different.

Janet walked in first as Bill slowly followed. They looked sad and tired and were unable to meet my eyes. Janet proceeded to tell me that she was recently diagnosed with colon cancer and that the doctors felt that she did not have more than a year left. Bill quietly sat with tears running down his face. Janet looked stunned and

removed from him and me, and probably from herself. My heart skipped several beats, the heat in my face increased until I was flushed, and my stomach turned as I held back from breaking down. We were all standing in the presence of the absence. There are many times in a room with a client when I have felt that the loss was unimaginable. I have witnessed couples' family members dying tragically, suffering illness and going through divorce, all felt deeply and passionately.

As I sat with my Supervisor working through the emotions I felt in anticipating helping with this couple work through the coming months and adjust to the finality of the relationship, I was once again reminded of the end of my relationship with a previous teacher/partner. We had years of memories and laughs, traveled all over the country together, spent off times together, and shared family moments. I would miss him very much and our friendship would no longer exist. Although not a death per se, it felt very much like a death. It was a loss that I had to work through. In order to manage the breakup of our relationship and the pain it would cause me, I turned to my years of training. I realized what it took to overcome physical pain and moments of fear on stage. I remembered a time when I was on stage and was dealing with a foot injury. I had prepared all I could to manage the pain but as the evening wore on the anti-inflammatory and myriad gels and creams couldn't keep up. I had to rely on willpower. I had to turn to talking to myself as if I was my own best friend, encouraging me to continue. I told myself that I could do this and I promised to care for myself when it was over. When I lost my dance partner, I had to keep going through the pain. I promised myself I would get back on the dance floor. To do so, I had to lean into the emotions and the fears of what would happen to me without this partner, mentor and dear friend. I know this kind of growing apart can happen, and it makes me aware that we are always in the presence of absence. The

death of the couple relationship is the deepest anxiety the couple faces.

Janet and Bill returned to my office the week after they shared her diagnosis. The session was quiet for quite some time as I felt it was important to honor their silence and what it would take to digest the enormity of the coming loss. Janet and Bill moved through bouts of anger and remorse for what they had not accomplished or what they did not appreciate in their life. They shared their fears and all of them were logical and within the normal range of what happens when people are faced with the end.

On this particular session, Janet walked in, particularly anxious and unable to concentrate. I knew that I had set up a team of people for Janet and Bill, both to work with them individually and with me as a couple. Janet was seeing an acupuncturist, medical doctors and even homeopathic doctors. But at this one session, watching her anxiety grow, I realized that my job for today was to work with what we had on the table.

I recalled a time when I was particularly frustrated when I started dancing with Max for the first time. I was unable to find a calmness within me and felt frantic and unsteady. He very wisely told me, "You must stay busy when you are dancing. You need to be in each step, not the one before it or after it. You need to be listening to the beat of the music, not the entire song, at these moments. As you move from step to step you will find that the entire movement moves in a more flowing way." I had never thought about it that way and lo and behold it was exactly what I needed to do in order to be present. What I was experiencing was my anxiety of what I had just done, what was coming and what might happen. It was a dangerous slope.

I asked Janet if she was willing to look at each moment of her day in a very similar way. But she was thinking of the year ahead, dreading how short it would be and all the pain it would bring. I showed her that she could think of it not only as the terminal year

of a life to be mourned and the loss of the couple, but as a series of precious moments she and Bill could tune into. She expressed to desire to live out the rest of her life living through her moments. Eventually, Bill returned to work with Janet in my office, until she was too ill to return. In the meantime, what we worked on together as a team was the reality of each moment lived together step by step.



Endings

*Sophia d'Angelo*

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## CHAPTER 11

# DESIRE AND PASSION, FANTASY AND REALITY

**T**his story is a composite of the multitude of friendships and relationships that I have encountered over the eleven years that I have been in ballroom dance and over the forty-five years, in total, that I have been performing, training, executing, and exhausting all the various forms of dance from ballet, tap, jazz, lyrical jazz, and contemporary modern to hip hop and salsa. This is NOT a story about one person, although it may seem as such and people may find themselves in the story, but it is in no way one person's story of their professional relationship, or pro-am relationship, coach and student relationship, or any other person in the ballroom. It is a conglomeration of all the stories I know of. So, please do not read into this that I am writing about myself or anyone I know. Nonetheless, the story rings true, and I believe speaks to each of us and should be told.

### *The ballroom dance community*

Over many years I have spent countless hours talking to both professional ballroom dancers and amateur ballroom dancers. I spend days and weeks traveling with the vendors, hair stylists, dress

makers, photographers, videographers, set-up and tear-down crews, musical directors, coaches, and judges. I have spent hours and days eating and drinking, sleeping in hotel rooms and staying up long and late hours into the morning listening and talking with them over many years. And this is the story of that life.

This is a story which, I believe, captures the essence of everything I have said in this book. It encapsulates it and serves it up raw.

### *Why do we seek the ballroom?*

People of all ages from kids to seniors come to ballroom dancing, but I believe all of us, on the day that we started dancing, had in common one critical component. We were all missing something. Some people came to the ballroom world suffering tragic loss. Husbands who died suddenly after long marriages, wives who left their spouses, children that never came into the world, and children who passed away. Parents who died recently, marriages that were dying, and many connections in the world lost and unable to be found. There are people who feel stuck in dead ends or jobs that are so high powered there is no room for air and life. There are people feeling that time has passed them by, and that the desire they once felt, or believed others felt for them, also had lost its spark. And there are those who feel that age is happening sooner than they expected. There are people who studied dance all their lives and people who feel that they have two left feet and never danced. There are professional gymnasts, ice skaters, actors and/or singers. And there are the foreign born dancers who were trained from the early age of four or five and feel that this is the world they are most comfortable in. But in ALL these variations there is still one component that unites us all: That feeling of something missing, and we find it in the ballroom, because the ballroom gratifies the areas of neglect in our private world.

## *Five reasons to seek the ballroom*

The five neglected areas that account for the missing core are wishes:

- To be seen
- To feel
- To be challenged
- To be desired
- To be needed by a partner.

These five elements that guide us to the ballroom are also what we strive for in our relationships. The difference between a ballroom relationship between teacher and student and the partner in our life, is that having a teacher is a contractual business agreement with money exchanged for the service and no sex. This is true of therapy as well. Like a teacher, a therapist is a caring person who supports learning and growth. Therapy is also a business relationship, a highly confidential one with strict ethical guidelines— no sex, no financial dealings— for the partners and sanctions for breaking the honor code. But within the constraints and protections of the frame of the contract, whether in therapy or ballroom relationship, the partners experience passion and love within the limits of the professional context, skillful care, protection, confrontation, miscommunication, anger, confusion, and at times, sadly the divorce or death of the partnership.

I illustrate this with a story, not to showcase a particular person or to suggest that all ballroom relationships are this way but to capture some of what we experience in our relationships as ballroom students, partners and dancers.

### *Judy: New to the ballroom*

Judy came to the dance studio one day after some long days of arguing with her husband at home. She and he were struggling to keep whatever was left of their marriage alive. The passion was missing,



the communication was waning, the touch was no longer stimulating, the sense of security was threatened, and the drive of the partnership was low and almost gone. She felt empty. It had been suggested by her friends and her therapist that she try ballroom dancing. And so she found herself at a studio signing up for lessons.

Judy was assigned a young man, dressed neatly, well-mannered and seemingly very much in charge of what the lesson was going to be about. The woman, unaccustomed to any type of partner dancing, at first found the idea that the man would take hold of her hand to escort her around the ballroom to the area of the room where they would work, a very uncomfortable feeling. She had not held another man's hand in twenty years, not in this sort of intimate way. It was confusing, she reported. It did not feel as if there was any sort of feeling being communicated, so to speak, by him other than to guide her along the floor. Yet, holding a hand of a person you do not know very well can create a wealth of sensation and send signals to the brain of connection and relationship. He, on the other hand, was so accustomed to this convention that he wasn't connected to it. Nonetheless, she was connected to it. The young man then began to show her the basic frame of ballroom dancing. He reached out and asked her to connect her right hand to his left hand. He put his hand on her back and she put her left hand lightly on top of his right bicep muscle, resting it gently. He described that they would connect her right side to his left side and knees would gently move in between his knees. This was a ballroom hold. For a woman who had been missing connection and partnership, this was a dynamic, confusing, exciting, daunting experience. We are social animals and touch is an important social element that we do not readily experience in our daily life. She was stunned. She explained it in this way.

"I was not sure that I was ever going to be able to come back to this lesson. How would I explain to others that I am this physically close to another man? Just the hand holding in and of itself, felt as if I was breaking a boundary. But, I also knew that this was just a lesson.

I understood intellectually what I was doing, but I felt something I had never felt before. I felt connection.”

I want to be very clear, as I move on in this story, that this is not a tale about how women or men, for that matter, fall in love with their dance instructors. It is a story of connection on a different level than we often are accustomed to. It does not always end well as no relationship is exempt from expectations and pain. Sometimes it heals wounds and fills in holes that were left open for too long. As a disclaimer, there are people who do not experience much of what I am describing. They keep their distance. Just as in our partnered relationships, there are those of us for whom the feelings of vulnerability and the sensation of being physically close to another are too complicated so they keep themselves less exposed, less reachable. This is neither good nor bad; it is simply that person’s way of relating in a couple.

Judy found herself at work thinking about the steps she was taught, and how could she do this all while being connected to her partner. It felt like a backwards three-legged sack race, for her the ultimate test. Nonetheless, Judy did return. Her teacher began to connect the steps to music. Music, for many people is stimulating in its own way, with or without touch. But Judy, who had had years of music training in her early life, felt an even deeper understanding of movement once the music was playing. Her first dance was a waltz. The waltz, in and of itself, is a swaying dance. When danced well, and together with a partner, it can feel similar to ice skating. William, Judy’s partner, tapped her gently on the arm to let her know that it was that foot she needed to use. She noted how gently he tapped her. Judy, for many years of her life had been in a physically abusive relationship. Her experience of touch was not a light tap. This tap reassured her that she was in the hands of someone kind and caring. The connection was becoming a trusting one.

Judy returned for lessons every other day for an hour and a half. As time continued, Judy and William learned not only how to dance,

but how to dance together. How to listen to each other's body, how to move in unison by communicating through touch and eye communication. Judy was able to express herself through the music without using her words and began to feel relief and passion and connection like no other in her life.

Months went by and Judy decided to go to her first competition with William. Competitions are fraught with self-destructive, self-effacing behaviors and flash backs to times when you were asked to be your best but sabotaged it out of fear. They are also laden with passion, excitement, challenge, success, and call forth one's ability to overcome a multitude of fears. Judy embarked on a new world. The experience of competing evokes a multitude of emotions ranging from apprehension to sheer panic, as you now must complete all the steps that you have been studying, be cognizant of each other's particular coping style when adrenaline takes over—and work as a team.

Judy had no idea that she was now part of a team with William, and his job is to protect her on the floor and to lead her. When the teacher is a woman and the student is a man, it is still his job to lead and to protect her. Many men feel as if their partners at home do not feel comfortable being led, and therefore, the ballroom world takes on a new exciting relationship pattern for them. When the ballroom teaches him to lead well, his life partner will appreciate his strength and clarity. Similarly if the student learns to follow well, her partner at home will benefit from her sensitivity. Ballroom dancing also teaches a person what to do in the heat of the moment and how to manage stress within the couple.

Judy was part of a wider team as well. Like most professional dance teachers, William had a number of students at the competition. The students support one another, in preparing for the dance, in sharing practice time, and consoling or congratulating one another on results.

## *Lessons from the ballroom for couples in daily life*

Ballroom competition teaches us, when we are part of a team of other women dancing with one man, how to unite together. Not all couples are successful, but those that are begin to understand the others' needs for support, space, and a judgement-free team environment. At times we need to develop a thicker skin. There are near collisions, timing that is off, failure to move with your partner. All of these are the bumps in the road, as we have in our outside relationships. Judy found that the beauty of the ballroom relationship is that, as we compete doing the same dance over and over again at progressively higher levels, we can make corrections. Above all, we practice relating and communicating in the ballroom relationship. And, hopefully, we take that home to our partners.

And what happens when it goes wrong? What do we do when the interest of the teacher is not reciprocated in the student or vice versa? What happens when one partner is cruel to the other or unable to connect? What happens when we lose the competition? Do we fight for the relationship? Do we run to a new teacher or do we work through our difficulties? All important lessons to take from the world of the ballroom to our relationships.

As I look back at my years doing couple therapy, I think of many couples who come to me in crisis. Some are caught in affairs. Some are no longer willing to live a lie and wish to declare their polyamory or gender fluidity. Some have experienced life-threatening abuse and live with the scars of it in their daily lives. Others are simply are too overwhelmed in daily life to remember what it was like to BE with their partner. All of my couples come with the fear that this may not work, that they will have to reconfigure their lives, or that they will abandon or be abandoned.

I think back on a recent ballroom practice session which I feel brings the stories of the previous relationship treatments to light and encapsulates the entire idea of the book.

## *Working as a creative couple*

Max entered the room, a smile on his face, looking willing and ready. As I sit waiting for him to arrive I notice that I am both a bit anxious to begin and understand that although I love dancing I am apprehensive about the focus and attention, the recall of steps, and the physical endurance it will take. I know that I need to integrate my previous training and my current training. I wait for him. My sense is that he, too, needs to gear himself up for what I might bring to the table, so to speak. What are my strengths and what are my weaknesses? What will today's practice look like and what will unfold?

Max and I begin by having an easy conversation about how I feel and what we both think we should work on today. As we move through the practice session, I find myself focused, watching him, trying to absorb the directions. I can feel moments of frustration when I understand intellectually what he is saying but something is in my way of getting it right. There are moments in our practice where my steps are not aligning with his. I am off time or my feet are not matching his. So it causes us to be out of sync with each other. Until I can understand what he is asking me to do, I cannot be aligned. Max often asks me if I had that step or combination in my previous life as a contemporary dancer. I recognize memories from previous training as a contemporary soloist and how I was expected to execute that step. Once we realize that I am bringing in old material he can then describe to me what it looks like as a ballroom dancer and not a contemporary dancer. It becomes current, and I am once again brought in to the moment. Max has another way of approaching the problem. He will often take the woman's position and I the man's position so that I can feel what he is asking me to do and what it feels like to my partner if I do it incorrectly. These moments are the most successful. I am able to be in his shoes and to feel what I might feel like to him. Is my body lined up, am I over turned or under turned? How does it feel if I pull

too hard or am too soft? All this is eye opening and hugely successful in my training to be a good fit for my partner.

We put the music on so that we can put all the corrections in. We stop training and simply dance. There are others in the room dancing near us, the beat of the music does not stop, and this is how it will be in competition. We stop, notice moments that are not correct, discuss them, fix them, and start again, always aiming for improvement. There is rarely complete perfection, but we can get as close to it as we can, and we understand that there is room to grow. We have become patient with each other, helped by having a history of success as a partnership, and willing to give the partnership time to grow. I understand that he needs certain corrections from me in order to work in unison. Me, the amateur! Yes, we both understand that when something does not work after trying for quite a while, then it is time to take another look at the step so that it becomes better for both of us. We are aware that we each have our own personal style that is ingrained and needs to be nurtured rather than changed. We give each other space to be. This is truly the dance of a great partnership.

I liken this to the plethora of couples who have walked through my doors over twenty years. They have had the same experiences of working together, fixing problems in communication, aiming for improvement and developing a healthy relationship. The couples who I have seen achieve success learned to listen to their partner. They learned to listen to what was being said, not what was in their own head. They learned that past information and past experiences belonged in the past. They could remind themselves that when they felt upset by their partner, they might be hearing or seeing something different than what was being said. They stopped to clear their minds so that they could see and hear clearly in the present. Many couples learned that it wasn't WHEN they were going to fight it was HOW to fight. They learned to experience what it feels like to be in the other's shoes so as to have a better understanding from a different vantage point than their own. They learned about flexibility and allowing space

for the one to change and grow with the other. They learned that it is ok for them and for their partner to be upset or frustrated or sad. Trying to change the other person is futile. You can only change yourself, and when the other feels differently about you, then that actually may change the other, without your even trying.

The ballroom couple wins and is successful because of their partnership skills, willingness to stand on their own and carry their own weight, and clarity in knowing when to lead and when to follow. The successful intimate partner couple learns to listen, to love without judgement, to listen to what is being said not what is in their head, and provide space for growth. I invite ballroom couples and the intimate partners for life to follow my lead towards a successful and creative partnership.



*Knowing when to Trust*

Max Sinitsia and Sophia d'Angelo

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## EPILOGUE

It was in early August 2011 when the idea to write this book struck me. I was absorbed in my ballroom dance lessons, working in my private practice as a psychotherapist, and engaged in the study of couple and family therapy in London at Tavistock Relationships during a summer session. As a former contemporary dancer, I learned how to use dance as a physical form of expression for the things I could not say. As a psychotherapist, I learned how to use my listening skills and my intuition as a way to understand what others could not express in words but in action. As a wife, I strove to find ways in which patience and introspection allowed each member of the couple to express their needs. This created a kaleidoscope of rhythms, movements, beats, leaps, jumps, falls, clashes, missteps, bumps, bruises, and battles alongside passion, commitment, excitement, and ecstasy. Those experiences or sensations needed a place where I could take meaning from them. And so, I began to write in a journal after my lessons and after my couple therapy sessions, reflecting on my experiences in those journeys.

When I look back at all the couples that I worked with over the years, all my dance partnerships, and at the couple relationship at the center of my life, I am profoundly moved by the ways that coupled dancing and coupled intimate relationships mirror each other. I am



forever in search of signs and symbols that offer ways to read another person or a situation that goes beyond the concrete perception of what seems to be happening. This has led me to the strong belief that often we live our lives in a defended state in case experiences would overwhelm the senses.

Similarly, we may dance in a defended state. The defenses that we use hinder our ability to be free, to let go, to uncover truth about ourselves. When I am watching beautiful dancers, I am all too aware that what I enjoy the most about the dancing couple is their honesty. Does their movement create reaction or does their reaction, or emotion, create a movement? I believe that the one moves their body and it produces a feeling in the other. If we are too defended, unable or unwilling to allow the feeling that it produces inside to come to the forefront, then we are hardened to our own and our partner's feelings and expressions. Similarly, if we are too explosive, chaotic, or pressured in our way of communicating, then we also will defend against the incoming onslaught of feelings. And, so we begin to shut down or hold back.

As I began listening carefully to the critiques of my dancing and my performing, I was struck by the similarity of the reflections I made in my life on my own development as a wife, mother, dancer and therapist. I felt that if I listened carefully, I just might find a gold mine. And I did. I heard my dance partner's frustration with my moving on my own and not listening to his body and his "lead" as a way to understand that, perhaps, I too often feel that I must be in charge. Perhaps, I too often feel that If I do it on my own that it will all be accomplished.

I became certain I am not alone in these thoughts as I began to hear these same concerns from many couples. In the ballroom I was able to have my own laboratory for studying body and mind, action and feeling in relationship. I could continue to practice over and over again this idea of listening with my body, giving myself time to wait, and then using those same ideas in my relationships. I then turned to the couples in my office and used those same ideas with them. It all came together for me.

So, as I have said, I am forever grateful for the lessons in my life as a dancer and a wife and a therapist. But, mostly, I am honored to have had the privilege to sit with others and to create our own lab for trying out new models of being in a healthy couple relationship.

Over the years working with couples, I have been in awe of the dance between life partners and the hard work it takes to continually create. It means that a couple must be brave enough to make mistakes, have the courage to look inside, and share the willingness to explore and possibly change. It means, to me, that a couple's journey to the interior of their relationship is one filled with possibilities, and one of those possibilities is to be a creative couple.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book began ten years before I actually started writing. It was a personal journey for me as I transitioned in my life from dancer to wife, mother, social worker, psychotherapist, and ballroom dancer. It began as an awakening. My experience as dancer, and as therapist gave me insight into who I was and who I was becoming. I saw each lesson with my dance teachers/partners as a chance to take a deeper look inside my psyche and my life. I noticed similarities between the lessons they were teaching me about complex body movements in coupled dance connection and my awareness of myself in a couple relationship in my daily life in real time. I began to see that if I looked deeper, those same difficulties I faced in the studio also affected my life relationships. I, in turn, translated those symbols, feelings, and experiences from the dance floor to the therapy office to help the couples that I was working with over the years. My work inside the treatment room appeared to take on a life of its own, with its own terminology and its own symbols within each couple therapy session.

I am so grateful to so many people along the road with me who not only supported my journey to write this book but also collaborated with me, and both directly and indirectly were my guides and muses throughout. I am eternally grateful to my colleague, my friend,

mentor, teacher, and co-author, Dr. Jill Scharff. I believe we were a perfect team. Her execution and direction and her continued pace setting and motivation helped me focus and stay on track.

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I am eternally grateful to my three committed, patient and knowledgeable dance teachers and partners. I want to leave this world one day knowing that I made a mark somewhere, that I was able to

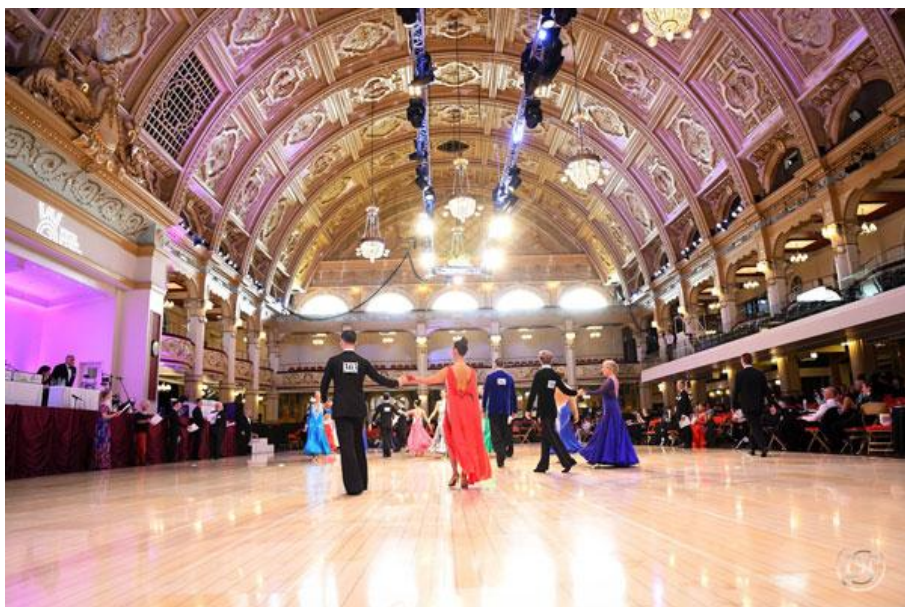
move beyond my boundaries as an older dancer still recreating the craft and always being the best I could be. I want to say thank you to the people who made this possible. Max Sinita, your words of wisdom on and off the floor will always be with me. You have guided me not only to become the dancer I am today, but the woman and friend I feel I have become because of you. You are kind, thoughtful and truly focused on what you believe is going to get me to the place I always dreamed of being. Nikolai Pilipenchuk, you instilled in me a drive that I thought I lost. I am grateful that you have instilled in me confidence and resilience. Your friendship over the years was a guiding force and a constant. You saw something in me that I did not see. Thank you, Natalia Skorikova for believing in me when I did not and for guiding me to Nikolai. And to Michael Choi, thank you for being willing to take on a dream I had to dance theatre arts and to be creative and daring with me.

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walk in to my therapy office and share with me their vulnerabilities and their life stories. I have always had tremendous respect for anyone willing to fight for what they believe in and what they want. I know that not every couple left with what they wanted in their relationship but that was not our goal. The goal was to give each partner and each couple the space and the courage to be who they needed to be and be the best they could be. My true desire was to assist, listen, and at times guide the partners so that they could become a creative couple.



Max Sinitsa and Sophia d'Angelo  
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## *About the Authors*



### *Sheri Rosenfeld LICSW*

Sheri worked professionally as a dancer before she had her family and trained as a psychoanalytic couple therapist at the Catholic University and the International Psychotherapy Institute. She traveled to London to study at Tavistock Relationships, a center of excellence for teaching couple therapy. When her children were grown, she put on her dancing shoes again, this time learning ballroom dance as an amateur. Within a few years of intensive study with her teachers and coaches, Sheri became a national and international champion in Pro-Am competition at the Open Gold level. Competing under her stage name Sophia d'Angelo in Ohio, Florida, California, London, Moscow, Cuba, and Blackpool, Sheri currently holds a number of titles. She is the four-time US National Champion in American Smooth Style, World Champion (2018) in American Smooth Style; US and World Finalist in International Style; and Winner, Theatre Arts Cabaret from the preeminent Ohio Star Ball. She is the 2019 American Smooth Champion, World Vice-Champion in International Latin, US National Champion in International Latin 2019, and US National Vice-Champion in American Smooth. She combines the athlete's determination, the dancer's grace, the performance artist's creativity, and the therapist's sensitivity to share her love of dance for the benefit of other dance pairs and other couples. In this book she marries her love of dance with her appreciation of couple dynamics to bring the lessons from the dance floor to help couples learn better ways of communicating and relating.



*Jill Savege Scharff MD, FABP*

Jill is a physician psychoanalyst, clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University in Washington DC, Senior Fellow, Tavistock Relationships in London, and Member, International Advisory Board, Couple and Family Psychoanalysis. As a psychoanalytic couple therapist, and social dancer at the bronze level, Jill is interested in the mind-body connection and the way that partners in a couple relationship interact. With her

husband, she is co-founder of the International Psychotherapy Institute and writes and edits books on the development of the self and the concern for the other in couple and family relationships. They wrote the classic *Object Relations Couple Therapy* (1991) and edited *New Paradigms in Treating Relationships* (2006) and *Psychoanalytic Couple Therapy* (2014). The most complete statement of their thinking is *The Interpersonal Unconscious* (2011). Jill now brings this writing about her extensive clinical expertise with emotionally upset couples together with her interest in ballroom dance to augment Sheri's original juxtaposition of ballroom dance partnership and couple therapy technique. She joins Sheri in the goal of illuminating the path to healthy couple relationships in dance and in life.