

# Dancing Well: Thoughts on Dance for Teachers

Folk dances can be tools to experience healing, integration, grounding, community, celebration, joy, affirmation, and more, if we work with them carefully and consciously. To me the dances are like living entities, which actively want to help us experience these qualities which may be scarce in our modern lives.

As teachers we are the guardians or custodians of these dance entities, and while they are in our care (or we in theirs) it becomes us to treat them with attentive tenderness. A certain amount of respect is appropriate, and for me, this means being careful with the forms and details of the dances as they are entrusted to us.

There is a paradox here, because dance forms are continually changing and evolving as they travel and spread through the world. In many folk dance traditions, dancing well depends on improvisation, interpretation and personal expression. Our challenge is to respect the form of each dance as well as the individual expressions of the form.

Dances are not ultimately intended to always be danced in the same way, but there are important reasons why the details and style of a given dance are worthy of our attentive care. These characteristics are not superfluous details. They embody the identity of each dance, while allowing the dance to be different on each occasion it is danced – in much the same way that individual tulips are unique, yet still belong recognisably to their species.

I believe that the oldest dances carry something which we in this day and age need to know. This ‘message’ is encoded in the structure (steps, handhold, tempo, circle or spiral formation) and in the style (whether steps are large or small, hard or soft, quick or slow; where movement initiates in the body, what chakras are activated, as well as every other detail of carriage and posture). All of this has symbolic meaning.

If we learn the structure and style, and then learn how to listen to what we have learned, we can ‘crack the code’ and get the message. When we get the message, we can dance with our own understanding and interpretation, and while this might appear to change the form, nothing essential has been lost. The message is still encoded in the dance, and someone learning the dance from us can discover it for herself or himself.

I am constantly grateful for the opportunity to decipher these hidden dance messages. Yet I look to the future and I wonder: if every teacher were to pass on dances without maintaining their specific characteristics of style and form, how long before those wishing to crack the code could no longer find the clues?

‘Receiving the message’ or ‘cracking the code’ is different from thinking or talking about a dance and coming up with a rational interpretation of the movements - that raising the arms and looking up is always about the sun, or heaven, or spirit, for example. The form that contains the message cannot be learned from written notes alone, nor can it be understood by merely talking about it. The message is transmitted only through the living, breathing, physical experience of the dance itself.

The beauty of human diversity and creativity is that each of us will always dance and teach in our own individual way, and I recommend that everyone dance with as many different teachers as possible in order to appreciate this miracle. But no matter how good our teachers are, we will not be taught all there is. To really receive what a dance has to offer we must do our own homework, cultivate our inner listening, and let the dance lead us again to what we already know. That is why it is important to learn to dance well: the more we learn about being in the body, the more the dances themselves will show us how they can best be danced and shared.

Even when we as teachers know our dances intimately, it is unwise to begin by telling everybody all about our discoveries. The challenge is to allow each dancer to find her or his own relationship to the dances, while we remain present as witnesses to the journey without imposing our own conclusions. If we are conscious of the potential of a certain aspect of a given dance, the more likely it is that people we teach it to will connect with that aspect in our presence, but we cannot do others’ work for them.

This way of knowing is a gnostic work: the sacred relationship between dancer and dance can have no intermediary. The paradox is that we do need teachers in order to acquire our basic tools: we all need help on the path of self-knowledge through movement, especially when we are trying to connect to something greater than ourselves, be it community, history or the divine.

How do we learn how to learn? How do we crack the code? How do we uncover the fire inside each dance form which will illuminate its reason for being what it is, and reveal the message it hides inside its steps? How do we each travel alone into the knowledge of direct experience? Dance! Dance, dance, dance, dance, dance!