

Can't We All Just Dance Together?

by Audrey Seidman

I've proudly come out as bi-dansual. This means that I'm willing to lead or to follow, especially in contra. I've also been heard to say that I'll dance with anyone with two legs (or wheels). Some people are pickier.

Last Spring, I was at an Old Songs dance in Altamont with many more women than men. As is usually the case, women paired up on the dance floor without a fuss, as the caller continued to address the "gents" and "ladies." I was sitting one out when he sat next to me for a moment as the dance progressed and I asked offhandedly, "Why is it that we don't call all contra dances gender-role-free?" His response before he had to return to his job was an evenhanded, "Well, there are pro's and con's to that."

I never got to hear his version of those pro's and con's, but I'd like to start a conversation among dancers in the Capital Region on contra dance, gender and language. With whom do you chose to dance? What should the roles be called? How can we know who's "leading"? Can we all dance together?

For women who prefer dancing with women and men who prefer dancing with men, a sub-culture of "gender-role-free" contra dancing has created a "safe space" for same-sex dancing and what might be called reverse-role dancing for about 20 years. One of the rituals of this culture is the use of brightly colored plastic strips tied around the arm or belt loop of the dancer in the gent role. This helps to distinguish the "band" from the "bare arm" in the lady role.

The DanceFlurry organization generously supported the last iteration of the Albany Gender-Role Free Contra Dance. As the key organizer, I stopped planning them this year because we were drawing too few dancers to break even and – I admit! – there were so many beginners it just wasn't as much fun for me. Why contra dance if not for the experience of the flow of the movements, the peaks of the music, the opportunity for joyful sweat?

Still, I know that some folks come to contra dances for other reasons. Some may be looking for more than a dance partner. A friend once shared that as a single person she contra danced as a way to experience touch.

I wonder, if it weren't for the touching, would we need the concept of gender-role-free dancing at all? Is the desire or need for separate dance space about semantics (gents and ladies vs. bare arms and bands)? Is it about language that is exclusionary? About meeting the right "eligible"? Or is it about our conditioning on who we are comfortable touching in dance pose?

In early May, we conducted a brave experiment. DanceFlurry and the Albany Gender-Role-Free Contra Dance co-sponsored the first of the season's Barn Dances. Some participants arrived unaware of what they were in for. We made mistakes; we didn't bring the plastic bands, for one. Even without these visual cues, the caller decided to call "bands" and "bare arms," the frequent, but not only, substitutions for "gents" and "ladies." One "gent" became confused and angry, before asking for his money back. One lesbian refused to dance with a man (or perhaps more accurately refused to follow). How disappointing!

On the other hand, two heterosexual men decided to take a whirl at the twirl and danced together. Two gay men, however, reported that other men recoiled from the man dancing the follower role. While they may have misinterpreted simple confusion, they shared that they are not likely to be back at a Barn Dance, or at least not willing to partner with a man again in a dance not more clearly GLBT friendly.

Linda Leslie, the lovely and resonant Massachusetts-based caller, shared a story at May's Lavender Folk and Country Dancers Dance Camp. Larry Jennings, her mentor and one of the callers and dance organizers who played a role in resurrecting contra in the 1980s, believed strongly that the person who came up with the "right" terminology to use in gender-role-free dance would be responsible for the next evolutionary leap in the world of contra dancing. Is this a challenge we'd like to explore together? How can we reduce the discomfort for all? How can we create a welcoming dance space for everyone? I don't pretend to have any answers, but hope you'll join the conversation. And ask me to dance!

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