

LADY WHISPERING

The Gentle Art of Leading a Lady to Dance

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A man may take a lady to the dance floor, but he cannot make her dance. To do that, the man must lead, and the lady must follow. These are the different roles of the partners in Standard Ballroom Dancing.

The role of leading by the man is that of determining the choreography and alignments and speed of the couple so as to optimise the use of available floor space around them using figures that are satisfying to the soul of the dance. To do this he must have a full appreciation of the figures in their repertoire, and how each figure can be adapted to different alignments and areas. He must also be continually aware of the space around the couple and how it is changing as adjacent couples are moving.

The role of following by the lady is of expressing that soul, for traditionally the man wears mainly dark colours and is hardly visible, whereas the lady is in a highly visible decorative gown. To do this she must have total trust in her partner's ability to choose and lead her into figures that can be fitted onto the floor space available to them.

There are some useful analogies between the role of leading in Ballroom Dancing and the equestrian technique of "Horse Whispering". The idea of working sympathetically with a horse in order to obtain cooperation is opposed to that of the cowboy tradition of the American west, where the economic need for speed in breaking large numbers of semi-feral horses led to harsh techniques of training.

Natural leading, which might be termed "Lady Whispering", develops a physical rapport between the man and the lady using communication through the torso, and rejects the use of pulling and pushing with the body and the arms. The technique for the man is to use only his hips, knees, and feet, so that his torso movement informs the lady how to move.

At the commencement of each step, the lady must know which foot is to move, in what direction it is to move, and how fast to move. She cannot move successfully unless her body understands these three things. These are the three things that the man must communicate continually to the lady in leading.

Leading is a communication, and so involves a language. But leading cannot be communicated easily by words because verbal language involves the left half-brains of the partners, but the right-half brains are in control of the movements. The transfer of thought between right and left sides of the brains involves a slight delay which is typically too long to be useful to the lady for her role of following.

So leading must involve body language. Every man leads with slightly different techniques, and so uses his own individual language. To follow him successfully, the lady must learn his language, understand it, and then develop her appropriate responses. So the first essential for a man in art of leading is developing that understanding with his partner. He has to teach her his body language.

It takes time for a lady to learn the signs in the body language that her particular partner uses. So the things a man needs in leading a new partner are patience and consistency. The consistency is most easily achieved by the man continually keeping his body turned so as to maintain a constant orientation between his torso and that of the lady. This is most effective if it involves a constant unvarying contact between the right sides of his and her torsos, although in the tentative first stages of a partnership, a constant relative alignment may be all that can be achieved.

The man has six quantities to use for the alphabet of his language. The man's torso can be twisted, swayed, and inclined, as well as raised or lowered, and moved forwards or back, and to left or right. For consistency he should move his hips, chest, shoulders, head, and arms as a single unit, locking his arms so that his elbows are at the side and slightly forward of his shoulder joints. He can then twist, tilt and incline this unit with his hip joints, can raise and lower it with his knees (with corresponding movements of his hips and ankles), and can direct it in varying directions with his feet.

Again, for consistency, the hands and arms of the man should basically be locked into a slightly loose soft cradle for the lady's torso. If it is soft she will feel comfortable. If the arms are locked, by tone in the man's arm and shoulder muscles, she can use them to sense the six qualities of her partner's alphabet, and even use his arms to help the man move past her when she is on the inside of a turn.

When the couple are in normal Closed Hold, maintaining the relative torso alignments is easy. It becomes more difficult when the partners turn to Promenade Hold or when the one steps outside the other partner, as for example in the Feather step of the Foxtrot. In Promenade Hold, the man must hold his body turned to his right to maintain relative torso alignment with his partner. It is too simplistic to interpret movement in Promenade Hold as both partners travelling symmetrically diagonally forward. In practice, the man would better think of it as himself travelling sideways to his left, and leading his partner to travel forward. Only then can he maintain his constant torso alignment with the lady. Similarly, when stepping outside partner, then both partners travel diagonally relative to their torso alignment, but one travels forward and the other backward.

The hard part about dancing in Closed Hold is that both partners must keep their legs either under or behind their own torso. Trying to put a leg ahead of the body causes two problems. One obviously is the danger of stepping on one's partner's feet. The other is more subtle. Putting a leg ahead of the body has a counter-reaction of moving the body back from the leg, and destroys the consistency of torso contact required for the leading and following language.

Once the partners have learned the words of each other's language, they still have to agree on the phrasing and the punctuation. This is like the placement of things like commas, full stops, and exclamation marks. These are where the movements speed up, slow down, dwell or even stop for a moment. Until the partners agree on these, the couple will rattle, looking like a train with the engine shunting its trucks.

Learning any language takes time and inclination. If a couple has a repertoire of say two dozen figures in a particular dance, the man must decide and learn how to lead each of these figures unambiguously. The lady needs patience to dance with him while he works out each of these leads. Then he needs patience while his partner learns his leads and adapts her responses. They both need the trust of the lady in the man's ability to choose and lead figures

that are appropriate. Trust needs to be earned, and takes time to develop. None of this is easy. But there is great joy to be had when the couple can dance together, and their souls can join with that of the dance.

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