

SalsAmigos: Teens Dancing Health and Happiness¹

Sam Gill²

It is 11:00 a.m. on a Tuesday. I enter the Community Room at New Vista High School in Boulder Colorado. As I try to figure out how to work a cheap portable CD player, the students in my new salsa class are drifting in, singly and in groups. Punching all the buttons I have a moment of humorous panic that I'll have to ask the students how to get the thing to work. That would be a great way to start. I'm your dance teacher, but I can't figure how to make a CD play. I finally, totally by accident, get the right combination of buttons and the CD seems ready to go.

Attendance card in hand I walk toward the teens clustered across the room. They are freshmen through seniors. What does that mean in age range: 14 to 18? There are more girls than guys; more whites than students of color and those are all Latin American. I circulate among them asking them to write their names on the card and I make a little small talk with them. There are some small groups of 3 or 4 that seem to know one another. Several Latinas are hanging together speaking Spanish and dancing together in close embrace. They are doing a dance I've seen and want to know more about. Perhaps later I can get them to teach me. Quite a few of the teens are just hanging alone.

At 11:05—a very weird time for class to start, but I didn't make this decision—I begin. "Okay, let's go. Everyone come over here and get in a circle. Come on!" They look up and a few begin the trek across the room clearly a little skeptical about this circle thing. I keep encouraging them to actually arrive on

¹ Copyright by Sam Gill, September 2007. Do not copy without permission. This article is broadly expanded and developed in many complementary ways in Sam Gill, [Dancing: Stepping to the Rhythms of Life](#) (manuscript complete, September, 2007).

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the other side of the room and as the last are arriving I find those who are alone and look around for another until I have everyone paired. The group numbers 23, an odd number, which is nice because that puts me as a participant in the circle. Everyone paired and in a bean-shaped circle. 11:07.

I don't introduce myself; I don't talk about the dance; I present no rules to them; I have nothing to say other than, "Turn to face your partner. Okay, this (pointing to the inside of the circle) is the inside of the circle and this (pointing to the outside of the circle) is the outside. Now those facing clockwise hold up your outside hand with the palm facing your partner. Okay the rest of you grip the thumb of your partner's hand. Now close down your hands." I look quickly around to see if most have done this.

Opps, there is one pair holding the inside hands. I make eye contact with them and gesture that they

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need to switch hands. And we begin. "Everyone step back

on your outside foot leaving your inside foot where it is.

Now step back on your inside foot without moving it. Now

step back forward with your outside foot. Got it? So it is

back on the outside, forward on the inside and forward on

the outside. That's a rock step. Let's repeat it." And so on repeating until I see that they are all doing

these first three steps correctly. For those who are not, usually clear eye contact and maybe a hand

gesture are all that are needed. For the one boy who is stepping the wrong way every time, I look at

him and emphasize "forward" and "outside" and keep repeating until he is doing it correctly. "Ok, now

that is half of it. Next we step forward with the inside foot and rock back on the outside foot and step

back on the inside foot. It may seem that you will step on your partner or crack knees, but I know you'll

soon adjust." And they do quickly adjust. Then we put it all together: "back on the outside, forward on

the inside." Over and over. "This pattern is our basic; it is called *guapea* or *guapeando*." Confident that

they are comfortable with this pattern, I ask them to switch places with their partners and we repeat the

whole sequence again, this time it goes very quickly. Now it is time for music. I put on some salsa

music, grateful that the machine works, and I count them in—five, six, seven, and—to start the pattern: “one, two, three, pause, five, six, seven, pause.”

At the end of the first class, after teaching a number of basic move elements, I tell the students: “What you are learning is a dance that developed in Cuba and is popular in Miami and danced all over the world. It is called *rueda de casino*. You will be learning both the “lead” and “follow” parts. As you have

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experienced, there are moves and they have names, usually in Spanish, that are called. As you know dancers rotate around the circle or *rueda* switching partners and doing fancy combinations of moves.” During the class, there has not been a break. There are no moments when

I have taken any students aside for instruction. No one has received any treatment or instruction different from any other student despite the large differences in experience, body awareness, coordination and rhythm. “See you all tomorrow.”

This class is part of a nine-week, four hours per week, seminar program that distinguished the New Vista curriculum. Most of the students in the class sign up for it not knowing anything about what it is other than, I suppose, that it is a dance class. Some few have had a little dance experience—I even had one young woman who was heading to Mexico after graduation to be a professional dancer—but most have no dance experience at all. Many have undeveloped coordination; others lack confidence; some exhibit noticeably slumped shoulders and down-cast eyes suggesting they have self-esteem issues. Some seem glued together—two friends that appear to be unable to function apart from one another. The developmental differences between freshmen and seniors are sometimes significant and noticeable, especially among the boys. There are significant developmental differences between boys (who seem like boys) and girls (many of whom seem like women).

Now it is a Friday nine weeks later. It is Exhibition Day, the occasion for students to show what they have learned and accomplished in the various seminar classes and individual projects. At the appointed time, the salsa students enter the stage of the school auditorium and arrange themselves as couples in two rows. They are wearing an eclectic combination of colors and clothing styles that they agreed upon. The music begins and they individually strike a number of poses to the breaks in the introduction to Puerto Rican Power's *Tu Carinita* and as the beat begins they do several multiple eight-count move combinations with their partners, selected and agreed upon before hand. Then they perform a move where they proceed couple following couple in a line circling around to form the *rueda*. The last three couples peel off and form a small circle in the center of the larger circle. This circle is in *afuera* ("outside") meaning that they do their moves facing outward from the center, while the larger surrounding circle is in *adentro* ("inside") meaning they are facing to the inside of the circle which is the standard for *rueda de casino*; that is, as a social dance the attention and energy are all concentrated inside the circle. In this formation they perform several moves I call (standing in the wings behind a

curtain) that actually cause the outer and inner circles to

interact in complicated moving circulating patterns.

Then they merge the two circles and begin a variety of complex moves, some taking several eight-counts to execute, many effecting patterned rotations around the

circle. The dance from here to the end is improvisation,

meaning that the students know a large number of moves by name, but do not know what moves will be called. When a move is called, the entire group must do the move simultaneously and accurately in the prescribed rhythmic structure. They perform "*confucion*" several times during the dance, which changes the "lead" and "follow" roles and shifts the dance from "on 1" to "on 5" in the music. And they also do "*afuera*" turning the circle to the outside so that the moves will be performed to the outside,

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which shows the dance much better to an audience. The students perform well with smiling faces and confidence and strike their poses as the music ends. The packed auditorium has been in an uproar of cheers and whistles throughout.

As I watch the performance, concentrating to make sure I make accurate calls and include all their favorites, I can't help but feel great pride at their stunning performance, but more so, I feel quite frankly amazed by what they have accomplished. In a mere 35 hours of instruction, this motley group has forged themselves into a dance troupe that I know, in certain respects, is among the elite *rueda* dance groups anywhere. Of course, they do not have the polish, style, precision, technique, or complexity of choreography of many competition groups, most comprised of dancers who are from their late twenties to the mid-forties. However, these high school dancers, after only 35 hours can all lead and follow equally and they can perform dozens of moves pretty equally in both *afuera* and *adentro* positions. I know of no *rueda* groups anywhere that have either of these skills. Many other things also amaze me. As Exhibition Day approached, the students became highly interested in choreographing patterns and forms that would be as challenging to them as possible. Nearly every student provided creative insight into how they should perform. They have become a community—a team—and one distinguished by the clear understanding that everyone's participation is equally important.

While most people who learn about SalsAmigos would surely acknowledge that it is an interesting and important activity for teenagers (and even adults), few would hold it as an exemplar of the most important activities that teenagers can do to nourish their development and to assure that they will achieve their fullest potential. I will show in some detail why I believe this to be the case. While teens certainly need to engage in many kinds of experience and they need to learn language arts, history, mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences and so much more, I nonetheless believe that none of

these is as fundamental, as foundational, as the developmental experiences that can be exemplified by SalsAmigos.

But it is “just a dance”! Well, yes, and this is at once its greatest difficulty and its most important asset.

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than educational, serious, mind activities. This hierarchy that separates mind and body and dance from even music and painting (which are considered more mindful) much less what are understood as intellectual activities places the

cultural value of dancing at the bottom of what is relevant and valuable for human development and education. Dancing is retained in school environments, if at all, because it is seen as a physical activity necessary for body development or even for release from the rigors of the body-disabling work of the mind. Some small justification for retaining a tiny element of dancing in public education is that it represents “culture” in both the sense of cultural heritage (thus square dancing is taught oddly in physical education classes) or in the sense of high culture (thus ballet may be studied as a subject but likely not as a dance form).

I have to admit that when asked to teach dance to teens for the first time a few years ago I did so reluctantly and primarily out of a sense of responsibility to do community service. I had imagined a group of lethargic kids whose attention would be difficult, if not impossible, to hold. Was I ever wrong!

The speed and eagerness with which these students learn is, in terms of all my expectations, simply awesome. Having taught the same dance form to adults of various ages, I am stunned by how quickly and happily these kids learn and how eager they are to learn and help one another learn. It is not unusual to find them in the school hallways practicing moves or simply showing off their moves to their friends.

As I have read the literature focused on teenagers I am bewildered by the strong tendency to see teenagers as problems. I realize now that the attitude of skepticism I had before I started actually working with young people reflects a pervasive societal attitude. I now believe that it is this adult attitude that may be their greatest problem. The attention given to teens defines them as problems to be understood and solved rather than as developing human beings to be nurtured and supported. Attention is on preventing teen pregnancy, reducing teen substance abuse, improving school test scores, reducing teen depression and suicide, encouraging teen rational and responsible behavior, getting teens to take less risk, to have more foresight, and so on. A large portion of teen programs are designed to serve specific teen needs. Grant funding for research on teens and for teen programs

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almost invariably require demonstrated contribution to serving specific teen needs, where needs are understood as problems. Whereas the attitude toward children to age seven is predominantly concerned with providing resources and experiences to contribute to brain and body development, by the beginning of teen years, kids have

turned into problems to be understood or resolved. Perhaps some of this has to do with the commonly accepted understanding that brain development is pretty well complete by the age of seven or before.

Certainly my experience with the teen population is limited and I know full well that there are deep and profound needs that many teens experience. However, my experience with teenagers is keeping up with their demands for knowledge, for challenge, for stimulation. I believe that these needs must be identified and addressed. Yet, we get what we expect. To see teenagers primarily in terms of brainless behavior, as perpetrators of anomalous behavior, problems to be solved or at least understood—are adults frankly any different?—this is likely all we will see. Teens behave in terms of the expectations adults have of them.

SalsAmigos, as any dancing or educational activity, ought to be appreciated for its intrinsic value and needs no external justification of its benefits. Yet, the social needs of teens and adults are well known and it is worthwhile to say something about needs. Concerns about teens center on several fronts: a propensity toward high-risk behavior (driving, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual behavior); a sense of depression due to stress and overwhelm; low self-esteem; violence and harassment; racial, ethnic, age, socio-economic, and gender preference discrimination; and failure to achieve full potential (low test scores and grades). While these are identified as youth needs and concerns, it seems to me the list is equally relevant to the adult population. It is important to see that these needs and issues are all of the

same fabric and that fabric is societal, perhaps even global.

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It is important to appreciate how complex is the modern world and how much pressure we all feel from almost every direction. Perhaps the reason we come to focus these needs on teenagers is that they fall in that space between the confident parenting practices most families have with pre-teenagers because they are under greater control in the family and adulthood when young people leave home and

must account for themselves. Parents of teenagers feel particular helplessness and anxiety seeing their children confront the often disenchanting and threatening aspects that accompany being members of our society.

The recommendations for responding to these needs are standard: good family and friendship support environment, involvement in meaningful activities, good food and exercise. Well yes, isn't this what we all want in life; and, of course, easier said than done for teens and adults. Still, the advice is sound if somewhat naïve. It is naïve in that there is some presumption that these things can be delivered to

teenagers in the form of added programs, whereas it seems rather clear that to actually meet these needs would require a significant shift in society, in the milieu in which we all live.

It is arguable that involvement in meaningful activities that create and nurture human connections, that create communities of acceptance and inclusivity, is, in this most difficult situation, vitally important.

Such activities provide grounding, direction, a base in value that assists us all in navigating the complex stress-filled modern world. I think there is a difference between something being meaningful and

something having meaning. The former aligns with having intrinsic value. We say something is

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meaningful to us when we love doing it and yet we may not even be able to say why. The meaningful is usually opaque to the question, “what does it mean?” For us to ask “What does it mean?” implies that the thing in itself isn’t satisfying; that it need justifying or being given value

by some meaning that can be connected with it. We often use phrases like, “Get the meaning out of it” or “where is the meaning in it?” Music and dancing are activities that we describe as meaningful, yet we are often unable to quite articulate what the meaning “in” them is. Most things that have meaning are what I call propositional, that is, we may propose a statement to “explain” what something means, yet others may argue with that proposal and offer other statements of meaning. On the other hand, when something is felt to be meaningful, it is something “known,” heartfelt, there is no proposition; there is no argument, no need for explanation. Others may experience it differently, but for us, we simply know that something is meaningful and we likely are not bothered at all by our difficulty articulating some kind of meaning. Now music and art and dance have no exclusive claim on being meaningful as opposed to having meaning. Anything can be found to be meaningful by some. I would suggest however the activities we find meaningful are those that meet our most basic human needs and that invoke the greatest value. These are the intrinsically valued activities.

Fitting to a post-modern Western culture, SalsAmigos arises, and in some senses is engineered, to serve identifiable cultural needs even though those needs are never explicitly identified to the participants. SalsAmigos is also fitting to a post-modern world. Characteristic of post-modernity is the absence of anything that is “real” and dependable. Groundlessness is the hallmark of the post-modern world in

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which teenagers live and grow to maturity. Everything is seen as questionable. There are no truths. Nothing seems dependable. The angst of the post-modern experience is often felt strongly by teenagers. They are trying to create their adult identity and to find grounding for a way of life. Teenage years are often filled with self-doubt, uncertainty, aloneness, disenchantment, and fear. Teen

years are often the occasion for high risk behavior, disregard for possible negative consequences to actions, and depression. SalsAmigos is an activity that is completely engaging, without processing or internal reflection. It is intrinsically motivating. The pace and demands of dancing require full presence; processing and reflection are nearly impossible. While it is seen as just a fun dance, it is powerfully real in important ways; it is grounded in bodily action. It is mentally challenging and demanding, and it unquestionably engages all the dancers equally with one another. Touch and contact and cooperation and effort and inclusion are not propositions to be debated or questioned; they are the hard physically experienced facts of SalsAmigos dancing.

Mind and Body

“Please sit down and be quiet!” “Stop fidgeting and listen!” Most of us have heard these demands from our earliest learning experiences. And most of us continue to say the same things to our kids and students. The statements are synonymous with learning. The implication is that the body is the enemy

of the mind and of learning. From earliest childhood we are infused with the unchallenged fact that learning is of the mind, the brain, not the body.

Schools are furnished with desks (often ones that are entered like a seat in a cockpit making rapid

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standing or exit difficult) that effectively disable the body and inhibit movement. Architecturally schools are containers where bodies are parked so that learning may take place in the brain. Physical activity takes place, when allowed, on the playground or schoolyard or in the gymnasium, all carefully distinguished and separated—both spatially and architecturally—from the classrooms to avoid noise and distraction. Notably, as schools are designed for higher levels of education, the interrelationship between classrooms and gymnasiums and playgrounds shifts to reflect societal intentions. Grammar schools have gymnasiums and playgrounds close at hand. By high school the playgrounds have become sports fields and the gymnasiums have become athletic centers. Both are clearly removed from classrooms.

Dancing, if it occurs at all in schools, is most likely done in the gymnasium (aligning dancing with sport) or the cafeteria. In a middle school I recently taught in, the dance classroom was an emptied dark low-ceilinged unventilated storage room located far from classrooms. In the high school where I regularly teach, dancing is done in the “community room,” the discontinued cafeteria now used primarily as a place where students may congregate to eat lunch.

Societal stereotypes support this separation of body from learning: dumb jocks (usually boys or masculinized girls) and empty-headed dancers (usually girls or feminized boys). And the sound bytes and ad phrases associated with higher education encourage and perpetuate the mind body separation. The University of Colorado, the university where I teach, advertises its merits with the sound byte “Minds to match our mountains” which might suggest to students something more akin to “high,” but,

of course, it means “lofty.” When I was in Toronto I noticed light post banners advertising the quality of the university by the phrase “A century of great minds.”

Then there is perhaps the largest secular ritual regularly performed in the USA today, school graduation exercises. Students and faculty alike don the traditional cap



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and gown academic garb. These garments, similar to Christian ecclesiastical garments, render the body inarticulate and actually transform the body to serve as but a pedestal to

support the all-important head. Visually, graduation exercises appear as a sea of floating heads. While there is in the USA supposed to be a strict separation of church and state, it seems no mere coincidence that educational and theological views of the body are about as similar as academic garb is to Christian liturgical vestments.³

Clearly we separate mind (brain, soul, spirit) and body and we value one over the other depending on the context. In education and learning, the mind is central, the body useless if not the enemy. There are unfortunate implications to this assumption. When we learn that the separation and hierarchization can simply not be supported, we must face the negative and limiting implications of continuing to arrange our lives and our educational institutions and practices in alignment with this fundamental principle.

Recently a variety of studies from cognitive science to philosophy have demonstrated the interdependence of mind/brain and body. And studies of teen brains have begun to show that, counter to the common understanding that the brain is neurologically pretty much fully developed by kindergarten, there are periods of significant development of the brain throughout the teen years. In a

³ Sam Gill, “Embodied Theology,” In *Shifting Paradigms: Theology, Religious Studies, and the University*, edited by Delwin Brown and Linell Cady. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, pp. 81 - 92.

way this seems hardly surprising to anyone who is around teens. But it is important to gain this scientific information and it places some urgency on how teens are treated. Rather than simply focusing on filling and training the brain fixed since kindergarten, we need nurture its physical growth and its structural transformation. We get a second chance, or a continuing one, to nurture and guide this process.

What is not yet well known are the details of the impact the environment has on brain development

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during this period. The question is really “how do we nurture the body in the brain, to use the ideas developed by cognitive scientists?” Some research has focused on the vulnerability of the brain to long-lasting and critical damage due to such environmental factors as drug and alcohol abuse and even violent video games.⁴ It is widely believed that positive environmental factors—exposure to languages, to music, to good families—are vitally important to develop to the fullest potential the brains of young children. It makes sense that positive environmental factors are also important to nurture and shape adolescent brains during this period of exuberance. Marian Diamond, a neuroscientist at the University of California, Berkeley, whose research demonstrates that experience can change the fundamental structure of the brain, supports this view.⁵ Bill Greenough, University of Illinois, wrote “After adolescence, it’s rare to find a person who can learn and speak a language that is accent-free. There’s something fundamental about how the brain becomes transformed through that period.”⁶

It is clear from my experience teaching *rueda de casino* to a large number of people from pre-teen through middle-aged adults that there are very different rates of learning that correlate with age. In my

⁴ Barbara Strauch, *The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries about the Teenage Brain Tell Us about Our Kids* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 21.

⁵ Reported in *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 39.

experience, pre-teens are rapid learners, but have difficulty focusing for long periods of time. Teenagers learn with amazing speed and most have the capability to focus for 90 to 120 minutes at a time. By the mid-twenties the learning rate begins to decline and there are significant changes in attitude. Teens usually learn with abandon, with little concern for mistakes or momentary confusion. Adults find mistakes and confusion far less tolerable and take them far more personally. It is clear to me that the body-brain connection during adolescence is essential to growth and development.

Other interesting research conducted by Jay Giedd at the National Institute of Health found that the cerebellum continues to change and develop throughout adolescence and is the part of the brain least affected by heritage, by genes. The function of the cerebellum, located near the top of the neck, is not

well known, but is believed to be connected to

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movement and also to a range of social behaviors,

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the brain. “What if we find out that, in the end, what the brain wants is play, that’s certainly possible. ... What if the brain grows best when it’s allowed to play?”⁷

Research has shown that cross-lateral movement develops the communication between the halves of the brain. The aspect of SalsAmigos involving constantly changing between lead and follow roles and turning the *rueda* inside and outside requires dancers to do all movement across several axes of movement. This ambidextrous movement works similarly to cross-lateral movement. The two halves of the brain are connected by the corpus callosum. The lateral division in the body corresponds with the distinct halves of the brain but in a crossed pattern. The right half of the brain is connected with the left

⁷ As quoted in Ibid., 44.

half of the body and vice versa. Cross-lateral movement, even watching one's own hand move across the center line of the body increases the communication across the halves of the brain via the corpus callosum and it is known that this is quite enriching to brain development. The ambidextrous nature of doing every movement in both lead and follow positions has the same impact of requiring extensive communication within the brain and requiring both halves of the brain to be equally involved.

The conclusion is that throughout puberty into the early twenties brains remain flexible and undergo powerful and important changes in ways that have commonly been thought were already fully determined by kindergarten age. The implications of this information are that there is opportunity and responsibility to nurture and feed this brain development through a full range of physical and psychological experiences. Starvation (deprivation of stimulating experience), junk food (mindless television, for example), or poison (abusive behavior, boring experiences) will have predictable effects. Good brain food is a full range of engaging and challenging physical, social, and psychological experiences. The research connecting such teen experiences with positive healthy brain development is well established. Yet, for me, brain studies, while important, reassuring, and comforting, are not actually necessary. There need be no justification for believing that teenagers, as persons of all ages, are developing human beings deserving of the greatest support and opportunity in all aspects of their lives.

Motivation and Happiness

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi articulated for us the character of that wonderful experience we sometimes have when we are totally involved with something we are doing. He called it "flow" though now it is as often called "zone" or "being in the zone."⁸ His concern was the psychology of "optimal experience,"

⁸ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience (Harper, 1990)

which he identified with happiness. He studied flow in the context of activities that are widely recognized as being characterized as optimal experiences: basketball (“zone” is closely associated with basketball), rock climbing, surgery, sex, reading a good book, and so on. Flow is experienced when there is an identity of action and awareness. This is the experience of being fully present to the action in which we are engaged. Our awareness is with or in the action rather than standing aside observing. There is minimal self-reflection and external evaluation in flow. The moment we say, “wow, I’m having fun” or “oops, I just messed up” we have moved outside of flow. Flow is autotelic activity, that is, the

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goal or end (*telos*) that motivates the action is the action itself. Flow occurs when action is intrinsically motivated. Flow occurs when we do what we are doing

just for the sake of doing of it. Csikszentmihalyi finds that people closely identify flow, optimal experience, with happiness.

Most education is structured around external goals and motivations. Students are constantly pushed to receive high grades, to score higher on tests. Almost everything in learning institutions is evaluated in terms of quantifiable measurements external to the learning experience and even the content and subject of learning. The measures are almost always artificial and meaningless in themselves: letter or number grades or arbitrary numerical test scores (SAT, for example) or grade point averages. In themselves these scores are artificial and have meaning only in terms of convention (GPA is usually on a 4.0 scale, SAT on a 1600 scale; it would make equal sense if it were the reverse) or correlation with other values (percentiles). For example, scoring above or below a specific number often correlates with acceptance or rejection. Such scores also rank individuals hierarchically within the group. An individual score correlates to a percentile ranking in the group. It is common for parents and even students to translate these scores into monetary value, which is still abstract, but now equating with societal experiential and conventional material rewards. Sometimes parents “pay” their children for grade

achievements and students as they advance in education often have their GPA translated into potential earning capacity. Test scores are commonly translated into the idea of privileges and freedoms either gained or lost based on levels of performance. This practice correlates with the bonus system and salary levels in jobs in the post-educational world. It persists throughout life today, even in the cultural concept of retirement (a relatively recent and culturally specific notion), the freedom to do something intrinsically motivating earned from a life of extrinsically motivated work. There is an implied inverse correlation between extrinsic motivation and optimal experience and happiness.

Almost every student “knows” from experience that there is at best a rough correlation between test scores and learning experiences or the internal sense of the value of learning. Most students “know”

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that there is sometimes even an inverse correlation between test scores and the sensed or intrinsic value of learning. Perhaps one of the things that makes teenagers seem so “difficult” is that they recognize and acknowledge that all of this is constructed and

arbitrary and irrational. Adults have come to embrace these as real and meaningful measures of intelligence, achievement, learning, and human worth.

Certainly, since the educational environment is constructed on external artificial goals there is a disincentive for learning to be autotelic, for students to experience flow while learning. External goals or rewards displace attention away from the activity, the subject and the experience of learning. Flow, optimal experience, can occur it seems only despite the educational system. If optimal experience and happiness—flow—occur primarily when we are doing what we do simply because doing the activity is fully satisfying; if it occurs primarily in situations where we need no external rewards or measures; then

our educational system discourages flow, optimal experience, happiness. Should we be surprised that learners are so often bored, uninterested, disenfranchised, unmotivated, difficult, depressed?

Csikszentmihalyi studied what conditions lead to the experience of flow. He understands it, in one way at least, as the correlation of skills and challenges (energetic stress). When level of challenge matches skill level, flow is optimized. If the challenge far outpaces skill, anxiety is likely experienced. If the challenge is far below skill level, boredom is the result. As challenges are met and flow occurs, skill levels rise and this precipitates the need for engaging greater challenge levels.⁹ The idea of flow is important in the attempt to create learning environments that are autotelic, where motivation to learn is intrinsic to the learning rather than to artificial external measures. Optimal learning, and thus happy

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learning, is when learners experience flow, that is, when each learner is in that zone where challenge pushes her or his current level of skill, ability, experience without overwhelming it.

It can be argued that a system where artificial goals serve as primary motivation—and this includes most educational institutions, job situations, and even life trajectories—the associated experiences tend to feel meaningless and disenchanting, even overwhelming. In such an environment any experience of flow, anything done for the sake of doing it, anything we do because we love it, creates a grounding experience that helps us understand and experience who we are. Because such experiences are so powerful, so foundational, so necessary, so fun, they shape our fundamental values and sense of self. They provide self-confidence, meaningful lives, base values, and happiness.

SalsAmigos dancing is “flow,” that is, doing it is the primary motivation. It is simply fun to do. It offers its own rewards and these cannot be quantified. The dynamics that create flow in SalsAmigos are tied

⁹Csikszentmihalyi, p. 74.

to both the dance form and to SalsAmigos pedagogy. The conjunction of action and awareness is inseparable from the form. Dancers move together simultaneously based on the demands of the music and the “call.” There is a constant challenge to perform actions simultaneously and on the beat. The music does not stop; the calls come constantly, so there is no space to space out, to loose attention, even to reflect on how a dancer is doing.

any experience of flow, anything done for the sake of doing it, anything we do because we love it, creates a grounding experience that helps us understand and experience who we are

Pedagogically the pace and the demands attempt to keep all dancers in the present moment. Most dancers experience the common attribute of flow, which is the loss of the experience of the passage of time. Flow especially occurs when SalsAmigos are

dancing to fast music. It is common for a class to run overtime simply because the song is still playing and the calls are still coming. Students never say, “we’re running over time!”

SalsAmigos pedagogy is designed to keep dancers as much as possible in the flow channel. Teenagers learn with amazing speed, even though when presented with a challenge they often groan and feign a sense of the impossibility of learning something new. SalsAmigos teaching requires the fine-tuned awareness of the students in order to match the challenge being offered to the current skill/experience level of the group, the *rueda*. SalsAmigos moves are systematically arranged so that they can be taught in a sequence of increasing levels of challenge. The form can become so complex as to seem endless in the possibility of increasing levels of challenge. It is open-ended in this respect. Properly taught, SalsAmigos can keep dancers almost constantly in flow. In the experience of flow dancers exert themselves physically and mentally at levels far beyond what would be possible based on external goals and rewards. Student attention is highly focused and for a much longer period of time than in any system where there are external goals and motivations or where the challenge differs significantly from the present level of skill/experience.

SalsAmigos provides that kind of experience that allows the dancers to actually experience what it is like to do something just for the sake of doing it, to be absorbed by the action so fully that they cease to be aware of anything else. The experience of flow is foundational to self-confidence, to an understanding of value and motivation, and to a sense of happiness and satisfaction. There is also something amazingly bonding among members of a group that simultaneously experience flow. The word “team” is a way of designating this experience, as is the word “community.”

Stress is attributed as the cause of many of the problems and illnesses of contemporary society. Most of us suffer stresses of schedules, demands, financial pressures, superficialities, senselessness of so much that we are required to do, and simply the relentless pace of life. Most of us rarely relax; many of us do

There is also something amazingly bonding among members of a group that simultaneously experience flow.

not even know what it is to relax. Even play and relaxation have become work for many with the accompanying stress. The effects of stress are physiological and well as psychological.¹⁰ “Tension stress” is often an aspect of the pressures, demands, and

measurements of externally motivated actions. Tension stress is different from “energetic stress” which is associated with physical challenge, competition, and the demands of learning a new skill particularly of intrinsically motivated activities. Energetic stress often enhances learning. One of the most effective reductions for tension stress is movement. Challenging movement, such as SalsAmigos dancing, both reduces tension-stress and presents energetic stress.

Touch and Contact

SalsAmigos are touching. And look who is touching whom. Boys are holding boys’ hands, girls girls’ hands, and boys and girls are connected with their hands and bodies. Yet, look at the way they are

¹⁰ For a brief description, see Eric Jensen, *Learning with the Body in Mind*, p. 64.

touching. This connection results in the lead's palm in contact with the back of the follow's hand.

Compared with a palm to palm hold where fingers may intertwine, this is a safer, somewhat less personal, kind of touching. Touch is basic to SalsAmigos dancing and communication. It is introduced immediately without reflective comment or use the word touch.

The other common hand-to-hand connection in SalsAmigos is where the dancers have an open hand with fingers overlapping, that is, where the tips of the fingers of each dancer are at the base of the partner's fingers. In the *guapea* connection the hands correspond with the roles. Left hand on top is lead; right hand holding the partner's thumb and grasped from the back is follow.

Diane Ackerman concluded that "touch seems to be as essential as sunlight."¹¹ Touch is, in evolutionary

**"touch seems to be as
essential as sunlight"**

terms, the first sense to come into being and is developed even in the simplest single cell creatures such as the amoeba. All the other human senses can be understood as specialized touch sensations: hearing as the compression of air on the ear drum; smell as the contact of chemicals on the nasal membrane and taste buds, and sight as photons encountered by the retina. Based on concrete anatomical and physiological connections, the skin can be understood as the surface of the brain, or, equally as important, the brain is the deepest layer of the skin. Skin and brain develop from the same primitive cells. At birth, physical and mental development are both dependent upon the child being touched. Massaged premature babies gain weight as much as fifty percent faster than those who are not massaged. Studies by pediatrician, Dr. Henry Dwight Chapin, found a mortality

¹¹ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 80.

rate of over 90% during the first year for infants deprived of touch in early twentieth century orphanages.¹²

At a conference on touch called by Johnson & Johnson in 1989, Saul Schanberg noted, “We forget that touch is not only basic to our species, but the key to it.”¹³ Helen Keller gave us profound insights about the importance of touch to being human. Keller lived a full and amazingly rich life in a world without

sight or hearing, relying fully on touch. It is unimaginable

that one could survive without the sense of touch.

“touch is not only basic to our species, but the key to it”

Constance Classen wrote, touch “is a fundamental human

medium for the expression, experience and contestation of

social values and hierarchies.”¹⁴ The complexity, profundity, and importance of touch is reflected in the

fact that “touch” is the longest single entry in the unabridged dictionaries of many languages. The

Oxford English Dictionary for example runs fourteen full columns. Add to that related words such as

“touchable,” “touching,” and “touchy” and it fills twenty-one columns.

Touch, the sensory organ distributed throughout the skin that encloses and defines the body, teaches us the difference between self and other. While touch seems located on the surface of the skin, clearly touch denotes depth and contour. Our skin, the tactile surface, is the interface between our bodies and the world, but it is, as importantly, the interface between our physical existence and our thought and emotional processes. We say we are “touched” by something when we feel deeply about it. Touch gives experiential shape to the world around us. Without touch we “feel” the true isolation that is at the heart of the enigma of being human; we experience the anxiety of separation and being alone. No

¹² See Deane Juhan, Job’s Body: A Handbook for Bodywork (Barrytown: Station Hill, 2003), pp. 43-44 for this and other examples.

¹³ As quoted in Ackerman, p. 78.

¹⁴ Constance Classen, “Fingerprints” in The Book of Touch, ed by Constance Classen, (New York: Berg, 2005), p. 1.

wonder there are so many touch-based therapies in our society today from the scalp massage of our hair stylist to massage therapists and a host of body workers. Philosopher and scholar of human perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, created an entire philosophical system based on the metaphor of “touch.”¹⁵

Feeling is something we do with the skin sensors to engage the world around us, but it is also a reflection of our inner being and emotions, our feelings. It is no accident that this sense incorporates both these meanings and that physical touch is closely associated with emotions. Since touch is the sense that connects us to the world, to others, to even our sense of ourselves; since touch is surface

(our entire skin surface) but also depth (our complete emotional landscape), it is little wonder

“the deprivation of body touch, contact, and movement are the basic causes of a number of emotional disturbances which include depressive and autistic behaviors, hyperactivity, sexual aberrations, drug abuse, violence, and aggression.”

that touch is both indulged and feared. The awareness of the connection of emotion with touch has allowed us to appreciate the depth of impact of physical and sexual abuse on the total human being. The reaction has often been to

avoid, even forbid, touch in many contexts. Early in the twentieth century there was a period of time when psychologists warned parents against touching their children and counseled to totally avoid touching them.¹⁶ It seems we have returned to this position in some respects despite knowing better. A poignant example is recounted by Tiffany Field.

A recent Oprah Winfrey show focused on this issue of teachers touching children. The president of the National Education Association said, “Our slogan is, teach, don’t touch.” One of the

¹⁵ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

¹⁶ “This American Life” episode 317: Unconditional Love 8/31/2007.

teachers on the show taught music. In the green room before the show, she told me that of course she had to touch children, as for example when she taught them to play the violin. But on air she said, "In our classroom, we hug with our eyes." Oprah walked over to her and said, "Did you get that hug I just sent you?"¹⁷

Rules against any kind of touching in learning environments are ubiquitous. Yet, while it is essential to create effective safeguards to prevent and discourage inappropriate and abusive touch, the elimination of touch altogether means the deprivation of the nurturing and healthy forms of touch that enable any person to feel connected to others and to the world; to understand herself or himself emotionally and physically. Touch has become taboo and identified with risk and danger.

We must find ways to incorporate safe and appropriate touch in our lives, particularly the lives of our developing young people. We learn of the importance of touch in the studies of Dr. James Prescott, a developmental neurophysiologist at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development,

SalsAmigos incorporates touch and contact in healthy, safe and important ways

who wrote: "I believe that the deprivation of body touch, contact, and movement are the basic causes of a number of emotional disturbances which include depressive and

autistic behaviors, hyperactivity, sexual aberrations, drug abuse, violence, and aggression."¹⁸

Few if any movement forms are, to my knowledge, considered in terms of their importance in engaging the sense of touch and human contact. I believe that SalsAmigos incorporates touch and contact in healthy, safe and important ways. First, SalsAmigos teachers never explicitly discuss or comment on

¹⁷ Tiffany Field (2001), *Touch* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 20??), p. 3. Quoted in Classen, p. 40.

¹⁸ Prescott, J. H., "Body Pleasure and the Origins of Violence," *The Futurist*, April 1975, pp. 64-65; "Early Somatosensory Deprivation as an Ontogenetic Process in the Abnormal Development of the Brain and Behavior," in E. I. Goldsmith and J. Moor-Janowski (eds.), *Medical Primatology*, (New York: S. Karger, 1971, pp. 1-20 (in Montague, pp. 177-78).

touch and touching. Touch is necessary and the focus is totally on how dancers physically connect to accomplish the demands of partner communication and interaction. The dance simply cannot be done without physical connection, that is, without touching one another. The characteristics of this physical connection, this touching, is safe in several senses. The actual touching has a clear utilitarian and necessary value with nothing suggesting anything personal, sensual, or sexual. Further, the physical contact is brief and open for all to see and it is incidental to other directed micro-goals like completing a move. So it is safe, it is appropriate, it is necessary, it does not call attention to itself, it is something most dancers are scarcely aware of; they know they are connecting physically, but they do not think of it as touching with the supersensitive connotations now associated with it.

Yet, this touch is amazingly important. It is through physical contact that dancers connect and communicate with one another. It is a medium of exchange one has with every other dancer. The communication that is involved in dancers connected only by fingers with one another is truly astounding. All dancers quickly become expert at reading their partner's rhythm, knowledge of a

The communication that is involved in dancers connected only by fingers with one another is truly astounding.

particular movement, attitude and style, energy, individuality, and so on and immediately react and respond to their partners with their whole bodies, connected through touching. The rapidly acquired

micro-skills of leading, following, and back-leading (when a follow leads a move rather than the lead) are all based on touch and contact. In a world where one of the most common and troubling experiences of not only our young people, but also of all people, is a sense of being isolated and alone, this amazing ability to communicate through touch must surely have a significant impact on these feelings.

The touch and contact involved in SalsAmigos dancing stands in sharp contrast with "contact sports" like football and soccer, both so beloved by our society. The touch and contact in "contact sports" are based

on violence and brute strength. It seems that a great deal is said about our society that embraces and values contact based on violence and dismisses contact forms based on refined subtle touch.

Movement and the Kinesthetic Sense

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle (340BC) wrote, “The entire preoccupation of the physicist is with things that contain within themselves a principle of movement and rest. And to seek for this is to seek for the second kind of principle, that from which comes the beginning of the change.” Motion is life. Motion is key to depth perception. Movement is freedom.

Any skill, dancing for example, requires sensori-motor interplay involving movement and contact. The

**The kinesthetic sense is how we
feel who and where we are.**

acquisition of a skill is accompanied by a feeling of “rightness,” that sense that the movement produces satisfactory results. The movement sometimes becomes habitual, or it is relied upon for both quotidian tasks and

artistic endeavors. Deane Juhan comments on the importance of this feeling of “rightness.”

So much of my *sense* of psychological and physical continuity, my sense of unity and security, depends upon my ability to repeat appropriate and predictable actions, that this feeling of “rightness” can scarcely be overestimated in its importance as an element of my psychic integration as a whole. Each time I “get the feel” for a new response, I also get a new feel for myself and for my relation to the world of external objects at large.¹⁹

Proprioception (Latin *proprius* meaning “one’s own” plus receptor), sometimes referred to as the kinesthetic sense, is absolutely fundamental to human life. Too few even know about it. Proprioceptors are different types of sensory receptors located in muscles, tendons, and joints, which convey information about the physical state and position of skeletal muscles and joints. Proprioceptors provide

¹⁹ Juhan, pp. 188-9.

essential information for smooth coordinated safe movement and the maintenance of body posture.²⁰

Proprioceptors give intercommunication for the organization of movement and the body's orientation in space. The kinesthetic sense is, then, the feeling we have for the size, shape, location, and motion of our bodies. Proprioception gives us a sense of ourselves as active moving subjects. We must have a kinesthetic sense in order to walk upright in the dark or move our hands and all our body parts without seeing them. The kinesthetic sense is how we feel who and where we are. Notably, kinesthetic sense is based in movement, in muscular responses, often to peripheral sensation; yet every muscular movement in turn initiates a reciprocal change in peripheral sensation.²¹ Perception and movement are inseparable. Movement unites perception with self-awareness. Movement connects us to the world, uniting while distinguishing the world outside and the world inside.

An amazing thing about proprioception is that, unlike other human senses, it can be improved and

Movement unites perception with self-awareness. Movement connects us to the world, uniting while distinguishing the world outside and the world inside.

developed through appropriate use. While we may train ourselves in observation skills, we cannot train the cones and rods in our eyes to collect more information.

Proprioceptors however can develop and improve. This is done through use, through routinized repetitive activities.

In awakening and improving the effectiveness of

proprioception we experience a stronger sense of balance, a quickening in our bodies, a heightened awareness of ourselves as embodied beings. We become more aware of ourselves and our connections with the world.

SalsAmigos is constant movement requiring constant proprioceptive awareness of the body in all of its parts. The proprioceptive and exteroceptive awarenesses that connect dancer to dancer, dancers to

²⁰ See Mark Beck, "Proprioception: The Seventh Sense" The Massage Journal, Winter 192 pp 28-35.

²¹ Juhan, p. 186.

music, dancers to precise execution of movement are demanding and through the ongoing dancing the enhancement and refinement of proprioception is demonstrable for all dancers. It is believed that an increase in an individual's sense of her or his own body and its place in the world is accompanied by like increases in the sense of self-esteem and confidence.

Physical Exercise

Clearly SalsAmigos aligns with almost all movement forms in achieving the benefits of physical exercise.

The obvious first thing anyone would think of is the benefit of physical exertion and activity. Very few

SalsAmigos, mention exercise when asked why they enjoy dancing. All dancers feel physically and

SalsAmigos engage young people in vigorous whole-bodied fully-minded exercise without them even ... thinking of it as exercise

mentally tired at the end of a class or party and with good

reason. Most have broken a sweat. When done to

music, each dancer steps between six and eight thousand

steps per hour. This is equivalent to a brisk three-mile

walk per hour and most classes or parties are one and

one half to two hours long. Physical exercise obviously increases heart rate, arousal, and oxygen intake;

it helps control weight, increases one's sense of well-being, and helps manage stress. Plenty of research

exists that extol the benefits of these physical states. And, of course, SalsAmigos is not mindless gross

body exercise like running on a treadmill. It is also mentally challenging and intensely body-mind

integrative. Nor does it focus on limited muscle groups, but engages many parts of the body.

SalsAmigos engage young people in vigorous whole-bodied fully-minded exercise without them even

necessarily thinking of it as exercise.

Community and Diversity

SalsAmigos dancing is an experiential laboratory on building community. In the *rueda*, when a dancer does not do her or his part, there is a natural inclination and incentive for others to assist. While this may be done verbally (and in my experience it has always been done gently), it is more often done by simply physically assisting the dancer-in-need (this too is, in my experience, always done gently). This often requires no more than a gentle guiding of another with the hand on the back or arm. It is part of SalsAmigos pedagogy that such cooperation is not part of our instruction. We do not say, “If someone needs help, tell them what to do, or give them a little push.” It is a simple fact that sooner or later all dancers will find themselves lost or going the wrong direction and will appreciate that softly spoken

SalsAmigos dancing is an experiential laboratory on building community.

word or little push or pull. I believe that this gentle

mutual assistance that becomes a constant part of

SalsAmigos is an important, yet tacit, part of the

dancers’ experiences. It tells dancers that it is okay to

mess up; it is also okay to reach out and help; it is okay to be helped. In the fast pace of the dance the circle quickly absorbs these little glitches with gracious assistances. And when the circle totally breaks down, which it does once in a while, it is the occasion for laughter, the expression of acceptance. When this happened, the circle can quickly be reformed because all dancers both lead and follow, so there is no need for sorting out time. “Grab a partner; let’s go!” I shout, and usually by the next one count we are back dancing. Dancers actually learn to do this themselves. In a circle of a dozen couples it is fairly common for a small error to confuse several couples in one area of the circle. The circle doesn’t stop and wait for them to sort things out. It goes on and the pressure, the good stress, of the dancing circle beseeches the dancers to get with the circle even if they are now in a different role and with a “wrong” or unintended partner. It is pedagogically essential to believe in the *rueda*, the community. SalsAmigos

dancers are never removed from the circle for instruction. Even individual instruction is given, as necessary, on the fly, that is simultaneous with the group dance movement. SalsAmigos never calls attention to individual errors. It is far more effective to allow the principal of acceptance and mutual cooperation to be a discovery of all the members of the group.

A bit more might be said on SalsAmigos pedagogy. There is no reflection on the meta matters, that is, on anything secondary such as telling people to be kind and respectful to others, or to tell dancers to

The core principal of SalsAmigos pedagogy is to create a highly energized environment of expectation ... The emphasis is on connectivity and inclusivity and these are not propositional ideas nor goals, they are the unquestionable expectations of any SalsAmigos dancer.

help others, or to reflect on how much fun we are having, or what great exercise this is, or that isn't it nice that dancing is changing our mood or helping us connect with people different from us. SalsAmigos pedagogy sees this reflection as not only unnecessary, but

actually distracting from the many benefits of SalsAmigos. It disrupts the "flow" of the dance. The core principal of SalsAmigos pedagogy is to create a highly energized environment of expectation, done by staying to task, which is dancing in the *rueda* and constantly moving the *rueda* to a new level of experience. The emphasis is on connectivity and inclusivity and these are not propositional ideas nor goals, they are the unquestionable expectations of any SalsAmigos dancer.

SalsAmigos makes quick work of adjusting for individual differences among the dancers and for adjusting to dancers that may not yet be comfortable with the moves. As the moves become more and more advanced, the follows may "back lead" leads who are confused or are just learning a move. This practice becomes very common and is scarcely noticeable to any observer. What happens is that the follow actually assists the lead to lead them in a move. While back leading can become a bad habit of some dancers (and for sure for some teachers) who think they must lead everything even when they are

following, the fact that all dancers learn how to do this (and learn without being explicitly taught, I must add), adds an entirely new dimension to the cross-lateral ambidextrous aspects of SalsAmigos. The partner physical connection is interactive and dancers are constantly testing through touch and contact the physical micro signals to assess the status of their partner. If the lead actually needs some help, the follow will sense this and, without a word spoken, instantly engage the back lead that will help them as partners get through the move successfully and keep up with the circle. There is never time to simply stop and work it out. Leads will often say a quiet “thank you” to a follow at the end of a back led move. Some times leads that do not know a move will quickly say to their follow “help me.” This is learning to be sensitive to another and help when needed. This also is an amazing experiential metaphor for partner relationships of all kinds.

The dancers learn that every member of the *rueda* must perform her or his role responsibly and immediately on demand. The dancers also learn that all members of a community sometimes need help and guidance. They learn that providing help is best done gently and even silently. There is no need to

The dancers ... learn that all members of a community sometimes need help and guidance. They learn that providing help is best done gently and even silently.

criticize those who need help or to call attention to them. A little help is all that is needed and it will soon be reciprocated. A community is an interactive, interdependent, inclusive entity. The rewards of the community are in the experience

of doing things as a group that an individual could never do alone. It is in the experience of cooperation, coordination, and a joyous experience of the group activity. Dancers learn that leadership is necessary; there must be a caller for the group to initiate action. Dancers know that they may strive to play that leadership/initiating role by learning to call. Dancers learn that there is room for the expression of their individuality through styling elements for example. So SalsAmigos is inclusive and creates community, a sense of unity we might call “team.”

Achieving acceptance among people who are different from one another is one of the world's greatest challenges today. It seems the whole world, as evident in international politics, is divided and at war over difference. Certainly the US government holds the policy that if you are not like us or trying to be like us, you are against us and subject to costly consequences. The whole colonial era has approached difference negatively, as a problem to be resolved. Even the common educational device of comparison—surely the most fundamental operation of all learning—conventionally implies discerning similarity, rather than the more technically accurate inclusion of both similarity and difference. This is why teachers must ask students to “compare and contrast.”

The terms we use to describe types of difference are telling. Ethnic (and that horrible objectivizing pluralization of the term “ethnics”) commonly refers to the ethnically other or different, to people of color. The term ethnic commonly has pejorative connotations, yet every human being has an ethnicity.

Solve the issue of difference and most of the other problems like violence and harassment will go away.

Disabled seems to divide the world into like us and not like us, isolating the others, the disabled. Yet, there are countless abilities we all possess and never a simple distinction among any area of ability between abled and disabled. Clearly we are all differently abled. We divide along lines of difference and fear and hate difference even though homogeneity is not enriching or challenging or healthy. Solve the issue of difference and most of the other problems like violence and harassment will go away.

Dancing has long served as the bridge to integration, not just the artificial studied tolerance of difference, but its true appreciation. Today dance groups from all over the world fill entertainment venues. We enjoy the dances of others and seek to be enriched by both observing them and learning them. Most cultures are pleased that others are interested in learning their dances. Dancing is a natural

and common bridge between people and cultures. In the flow of dancing the issues of political, economic, racial, and religious differences have no place.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the swing/Lindy Hop era, thousands of whites in New York City went to the great ballrooms in Harlem, such as The Savoy. Decades before the civil rights movement, blacks and whites danced together peacefully and joyfully and whites voluntarily embraced black dances and dancers.

SalsAmigos dancing achieves integration as well. The *rueda* is inclusive with the ability to integrate along many axes of difference: age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, religion, politics, personal style, ability, skill, experience. SalsAmigos never reflects on the acceptance of difference but rather acts undauntingly inclusively.

Dancing, both programs for young people and as presented in culture generally, is often based on a competitive sport model. Break dance and hip hop are dance forms that are based on symbols of

SalsAmigos never reflects on the acceptance of difference but rather acts undauntingly inclusively.

aggression and competition. Historically they arose as alternatives to physical aggression. The progressive elimination model of sport and reality television is central to the hugely popular television shows “Dancing with the

Stars” and “So You Think You Can Dance.” It is also the basis of the Dancing Classrooms program offered to 18,000 students in 180 New York City schools by American Ballroom Theater Company. As depicted in the popular documentary film “Mad Hot Ballroom” and the commercial film “Take the Lead,” Dancing Classrooms is based on the progressive elimination of dance groups from the various schools until a single school’s dancers are found to be the winners. In contrast, SalsAmigos dancing is much more intrinsically motivated and inclusive. SalsAmigos has no back row and is not focused on selecting the winner out of all the others who, it would seem, must see themselves as losers.

Individuality and Creativity

But what about individuality? In such a group-centered activity, is there any room for the individual and for distinctively individual expression? Contemporary American society places high value on

individuality and freedom of expression. Clearly, in SalsAmigos every person must be on the beat in the

SalsAmigos experience is that every individual has a responsibility to the community and that achieving one's individual potential is satisfying because of the affect on the group.

music and accurately and simultaneously execute the

moves that are called. SalsAmigos experience is that

every individual has a responsibility to the community

and that achieving one's individual potential is satisfying

because of the affect on the group. Individual

achievement and expressiveness is always possible

through the endless potential for styling, technique, form, partnering skill, and certainly the level of dancing experience and skill. Dancers can move from circle to circle based on their level of skill and experience. Dancers can learn to call the moves, thus engaging higher and higher levels of challenge and the accompanying experience of fun and satisfaction.

So-called "creative dance" is often understood as that sort of dance where an individual is flitting about in totally "free form" unrestricted in any way even by music or any movement conventions. Many may experience this kind of formless (which by the way it is not) dancing as creative. Yet, to create something involves creating form. The most satisfying creation comes within the context of some form, exercising its energetics, pushing its limits, discovering something others have yet to accomplish. This is why almost all creativity occurs within a genre, often a tiny sub-genre. Photography is a good example. While most of us snap a picture now and then, only the accomplished and creative photographer can create images that are art.

SalsAmigos are often amazed when shown a move they are about to learn. When they see a new move for the first time, many see it as completely novel and they often think it will be impossible to learn it. Yet, later while learning the move they realize it is comprised of novel ways of executing and combining the simple elements they already know into a flowing remarkably delightful new move, a work of art. *Rueda de casino*, while comprised of hundreds of named moves, is based on about a half dozen basic elements.

SalsAmigos can and do make up new moves, but they do not have to in order to gain essential insights about creativity.

Gender

Society presents rather clear images of gender roles and the expectations of gender relationships. This area of society is among the most controversial and contentious. Failure or refusal to conform to the

established gender roles often comes at a great cost.

Gender roles related to dancing are ... strongly enforced by our society.

Gender roles related to dancing are particularly strongly enforced by our society. It is a fairly pervasive view that dancing is for females only. We have all heard the

phrase “white men can’t dance” which can be used in so many unfortunate ways. The popular film, “Billy Elliot,” (2000) set in County Durham England in 1984 explored the family and community repercussions of a boy who wanted to dance ballet. Boys are rarely enrolled in ballet classes or any of the other dance classes for young people. Even hip-hop, despite its roots in break dance, is more commonly done by girls. The principal bastion of male dancing is break dance. It tends to gender exclusion as well. Until recently girls have been excluded. The so-called B-girl was rare indeed and

when present she usually danced in a marginal role to the boys. Dancing and gender role go hand in hand and in ways I feel are anything but healthy.

SalsAmigos deals with the gender issue most effectively by actually not paying attention to it at all. Certainly SalsAmigos acknowledges that dancers are gendered people, but SalsAmigos does not associate any dance role expectations with a dancer's gender. Further there are no gender associations with any aspect of the dance. The results are not to simply ignore gender and gender roles, but to open the space for individuals to explore and experience various roles that they know, in the larger society, have gender connotations. Everyone knows that in the society at large and in history, the male is the lead and by leading actually acts out his masculinity. Females follow with the connotations of being

secondary and passive and responsive. Responses to these

SalsAmigos does not associate any dance role expectations with a dancer's gender.

roles by members of communities that are more gender sensitive are interesting to me. I have often heard women I know to be outspoken feminists say, "You know, I really like just relaxing and letting a man take over." I have also heard, "I like

feeling really feminine; wearing sexy salsa clothes and shoes; moving my body in a sensuous feminine way." It is wonderful that dancing offers the context for gendered roles to be performed and most fully realized even if, in some ways, it contrasts with perhaps staunch social positions. I have heard male social dance teachers describe gender associations with dance roles this way, "The lead's (man's) job is to show off the beauty of the follow (the woman)." Or, "The lead asks (through bodily action presumably) the follow 'will you take this action' and the follow graciously accepting 'yes, I'd be most happy to do so.'" The intention is nice, but the action remains the same as the gendered images. The woman is the passive pretty one to be humored into the man's strong willful, yet sensitive, guidance or manipulation.

In SalsAmigos everyone experiences every role without anything being identified as gendered. Through this experience dancers learn that following is as demanding as is leading yet different. I believe that

In SalsAmigos everyone experiences every role without anything being identified as gendered.

most teen SalsAmigos have few if any thoughts about gender and gender role. Particularly for young people developing gendered identities and exploring gender roles, SalsAmigos offers a safe context for doing so, a

healthy accepting context where gender does not equate to role expectation. I knew this worked when one day I drove up in front of the high school where I was teaching and saw two boys on the school ground in plain sight of many other students practicing SalsAmigos moves together. SalsAmigos provides a safe comfortable environment for gay, bi-sexual, and undecided young people.

Music

SalsAmigos dancing is done to music. Music is the tapestry that holds all the dance designs woven into it. The rhythm is what grounds the simultaneity of the movement by all the dancers. The tempo of the

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music corresponds with the level of energy, intensity, focus, and motivation of the dancers. Interestingly, adults tend to prefer slower music while learning, teenagers absolutely love fast music that pushes them and challenges them and helps them stay in

focus, in the zone.

It is vogue today to attempt to argue the importance of music to education based on scientific studies that indicate impact on brain development and on student performance based on academic test scores.

While clearly well intended, this sort of effort seems narrow-minded to me, yet it is played to the

narrow-mindedness of the educational system that seems to measure everything in terms of cost per student per year in relation to test scores. It seems that if one cannot demonstrate that the inclusion of music in school curricula does not cost-effectively produce increases in test scores, it should not be included. But the question might be asked, “What is so important about young people learning the math, science, language, history, and so forth that is included in academic testing?” Can it be anything other than to allow the development of healthy, happy, responsible, well-adjusted human beings whose lives are enriched in every possible way? Is there anyone on earth that would contest that music and art and dance and literature and beautiful things are the essentials of the sought-after life?

Cultural, historical, sub-cultural, and individual identities are all created through music and dancing.

There has never been a community in human history without these. That there need be any discussion

anyone even modestly educated in the humanities and in history would appreciate the importance of music, dance, and art in all human cultures

of this at all suggests a shameful and alarming narrow-mindedness and a failure of education in that anyone even modestly educated in the humanities and in history would appreciate the importance of music, dance, and art in all human cultures. I like to think of the story of the

Inuit woman who was isolated from her people and lived alone for many years. When she was found and rejoined her community all the clothing she had made while alone was elaborately decorated. So, while it is certainly interesting to learn about the impact of music on brains and test scores, I have to respond to this labored effort to justify music as powerfully affecting human beings as surely most teenagers might, “Duh!”

Furthermore, I find these studies narrow-minded in another way. All that I have read seem to understand music as limited largely to Western commercial and classical music. The controversial Mozart effect is a good example. The Mozart effect is a theory suggesting that classical music,

particularly Mozart (and specific Mozart compositions at that), increases brain activity and is accompanied by short-term improvements in certain brain functions such as spatio-temporal reasoning. Some have even suggested that particular works by Mozart reduce the number of seizures in people with epilepsy.

While these studies seem to have a limited understanding of music, they also seem rarely to differentiate between musics. Not surprisingly classical seems the standard, but shouldn't they be concerned about the impact of "gangster rap" and "heavy metal" music and its differences on learners compared with Mozart? Another thing I find missing is the acknowledgement that while schools may have reduced or stopped teaching music, students are not thereby deprived of music. In my experience

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has been dance music**

the student without an Ipod or an MP-3 player is even rarer than the student without a cell phone that has ring tones for all the latest tunes. Every school has quite a few students involved in garage bands, kids hanging out together endlessly making music.

The music-is-good-for-learning studies do not take into account that almost all young people spend a large percentage of their time listening to and making music. Nor do they seem aware that most teachers strictly forbid use of music players during class.

One last complaint of these studies, as well-meaning as I believe them to be, is that they almost never mention the relationship between music and movement or dance. It is a simple fact that almost all the world's music throughout human history has been dance music. Throughout its history the successful salsa bands and musical developments were those that have most satisfied dancers. In the history of the development of jazz music, it was enormously popular so long as people could dance to it. When it developed into music that wasn't danceable, its popularity dropped and it became music for an esoteric

elite segment of society.²² We all know that, long before they talk, small children in all cultures “dance” when they hear music. Only fairly recently have we begun to lose that sense of the close proximity of music and dancing and this shift aligns with the duplication and commercialization of music recordings.

SalsAmigos dancing is done to music and it is, while dancing, also the participation of extending the rhythm. The dancers step on counts one, two, three, five, six, seven. There are no instruments in Latin music that play this rhythm. The rhythmic structure of salsa music is created through the interplay of many different instruments and musicians—timbales, bongos, congas, cow bell, and so on—and the

SalsAmigos dancing is making rhythm, that is, making music, while, at the same time, it is carefully listening to the music, its character, flavor, color.

dancers step patterning participate in this complex layering of rhythms. SalsAmigos dancing is making rhythm, that is, making music, while, at the same time, it is carefully listening to the music, its character, flavor, color. Spanish speaking dancers also attend to the

lyrics.²³ Dancing and music are inseparable as dance and music have been throughout human history.

SalsAmigos dancers bodily experience this interplay both absorbed in it and creatively participating in it like members of the band.

It may also be argued that since music and rhythm are powerfully connected with cultural and historical identity, the participation in these rhythms as an experientially based way of learning about and appreciating cultures and histories.

²² This correlation is easily seen in Ken Burn’s great DVD and book on Jazz

²³ Non-Spanish speaking students often can sing the lyrics along to the music even though they do not know what the lyrics mean.

Dancing as Self-Othering: The Human Distinction

Dancing, of all human art and cultural forms, is arguably the most bodied, the most mind-body integrative. Dancing is the body. Dancing is done with the body being both the means and the outcome. In dancing the body is both instrument and outcome, both process and product. I find that while dancing does many things—such as create and enact identity, negotiate differences, enact protest,

Dancing is the very source of the powers and behaviors and abilities that make us human.

effect change—and it is thus powerful, it is in some greater sense constitutive of being human. This is what interests me most. That is, as I understand dancing, it is inseparable from that which distinguishes us as human beings. Dancing

is the very source of the powers and behaviors and abilities that make us human. In terms of human development, dancing is pre-linguistic; children dance before they speak. In terms of cultural views more than one religion—consider the Hindu form of Shiva known as Nataraja—sees the creation and destruction of the universe arising from dancing. Dancing means nothing, does nothing, but it is in dancing that meaning and doing and making are possible at all. Dancing is a kind of relationality that founds the very possibility of symbol and language and art and ritual. I personally believe dancing to be more fundamental—one might even use Merleau-Ponty’s term elemental—even than ritual, art, metaphor, language.

Dancing does what ought not to be possible, that is, dancing creates an artifice, an other, something

Dancing means nothing, does nothing, but it is in dancing that meaning and doing and making are possible at all.

made up, something that is not the dancer, yet, because this made up thing, this artifice, is created of the body, it is experienced as self. Inspired by my studies of dancing, I call this aspect of dancing “self-othering.” It is the experiential bridge between self

and other. Arguably there must be some initial experiential foundation that underlies all the connectivities that constitute our humanity, those “this-is-not-that, but this-is-that” kinds of connections that distinguish language, art, metaphor, ritual, religion. Dancing is one of the fundamental bodily experiences that make our humanness possible.