



Procession by Persuasion

The art of Lead and Follow

A true story by Richard Parker, of Delray Beach, FL

They lined across the hall, dressed in rainbow colours – the ladies of the evening, radiating their ball gown splendour, waving like flowers on the crest of a hill.

And arrayed in front of them, all in tuxedo garb, like a phalanx of Men in Black, we milled to and fro, anxious with anticipation, awaiting the starting moment.

This was the “Jack and Jill” event at the first USABDA state competition in Orlando FL in 1991, and I remember being the Jack awaiting his Jill.

We were ready for the Quickstep competition – that special dance where the partners move in syncopated synchronization to a fast trotting beat, skipping and skittering across the floor in a manner that belies the notion of conservative ballroom dance. This was Jive wrought in lateral moves, Swing spread across the stage, and...

My moment had come. I eagerly awaited the announcement of my unknown partner, who would join me in this joyous jump across the wood, this abandonment of physical laws – this...

And there she was, weighing in at 225 pounds.

In rapid succession, I felt the accelerated consequence of the Adrenaline pouring into my veins, the heightened awareness, the pupils dilating, the quickening impulse – the fight or flight response – heritage from my distant ancestors – time to FLEE.

Too late! She caught me before my dash to freedom – and then, hoisting my arm to the sky, she declared: “OK, are you READY?”

“Am I ready?” How am I going to...

The music started – “42nd Street” the fast pulse:

*Come and meet those dancing feet
At the avenue I'm taking you to –
42nd Street*

TOO LATE! I was swept across the floor like a leaf caught in the breeze, tumbling in the wake of an immense force, unyielding and impressive.

But now – it seemed so gentle. In fact, as the yellow-satin lady progressed, she was – smooth, silky, no anxious jumping or stepping. She was gliding in great lateral moves down the dance floor.

And I hung on, attempting to get my “follow” back “in the lead”.

Surprisingly, there was no stress. The lady, like a gyroscope on a gimbals set, was precisely on her own weight – each step moving in tandem with the weight change so she carried herself without moving into, or obliterating my space.

I never forgot that.

It seems a lady can dance light or heavy, independent of her actual weight, but totally dependent on how she uses that weight over her feet as she moves. I wondered if I moved as well in my lead.

Yes, the lead and follow – the elegant Method of Movement, should regularly encompass those experiences. It is the happy blending of the man and the lady, which elects a lead and nominates a follow.

Lead and Follow – in tango it is the procession of passion. In the swing dances it is the parade of the promenade. In the Latin dances it is the balance on edge.

And to quote the real authority, Alex Moore:

It is of utmost importance for the lady to keep contact with the man and to keep her body perfectly still from the hips upward, in order to feel the lead for a turn at the proper moment. She must not anticipate-she must not have a mind of her own. She must just follow whatever the man does and not attempt to correct him. Contact with the partner should not be at the hips only, but from the hips and the lower part of the body-the "diaphragm"

And there is always the signature experience.

This was the time in Melbourne, FL when I met an 87-year-old lady at the edge of the dance floor. She displayed no special need or care at the time she stepped gently onto the floor smiling sweetly at me. It was only at that time I noticed her walker, which stayed on the carpet, patiently awaiting its owner.

Her walker, the symbol of infirmity, confiner of movement, and sole enabler of balance, now no longer needed as she dutifully followed my lead around the floor, stepping gingerly on the polished wood, deeply engaged in the music and absorbed in the spirit of the evening. She was transfixed from the semi-invalid to the lady of energy, and her spirits soared with the melody and the ambience. Although somewhat brittle of movement, she had no lack for spirit, and my lead adjusted to her pace, and it was wonderful.

So who is to say that the man's lead requires such a surfeit of skill? I believe it is satisfied by the sensitivity to the lady, timed with the music and adjusted for the mood of the moment.

Lead and Follow – that procession by persuasion, wherein the man still retains his last bastion of dominance, his public mastery of the woman – if only for three minutes.

Lest he forget – the lady may indeed follow, but only because she wants to.