

A Dance

Whenever my wife and I happen to be at a wedding reception with our adult children, I know what's going to happen when the band or DJ has been on stage for an hour or so after the dinner and cake. My daughter will request a rather sappy song by Canadian singer Anne Murray, "Could I Have This Dance For the Rest of My Life?" And I and my bride of almost 45 years will get up and dance, while the revelers applaud. For what, I'm not sure, since I never considered any marriage an accomplishment, but rather an ongoing negotiation. No one ever wins, and in a good marriage, neither party ever declares victory.

To be honest, I like the lyrics for Ms. Murray's song, but for me the frisson of the melody is long gone. Still, I enjoy dancing with my wife, or ... don't tell her ... probably any woman. It's such an extraordinary thing to put one's arms around a woman in a fairly dispassionate setting, or so it seems to this Irishman. I often wonder how an uptight society came to allow it, except for the frigid holy ones among us.

As I think back, I didn't put my arms around a girl until my first dance at age 13. Understand that I came from a family of boys, and I'm sure that's pertinent. We would not have wanted a sister, but if one had been dropped off at our house for inspection, the three of us would surely have been polite as we walked around the girl and studied her, as a group of gallery patrons might scrutinize a bronze statue. When she popped her chewing gum, we would have quickly run off like scattering monkeys.

When I entered junior high school and was forced into social functions with the opposite sex sooner than I wanted, I found myself unable to simply walk up to a girl and begin a conversation. I knew that such was within the scope of male potential, because I saw other more confident boys doing so. But I couldn't seem to manage small talk.

Even saying the word 'dance' felt so unmanly that when asking a girl to dance, all I could manage was, "Would you like to?" Had an overly sensitive father been standing at her side, I might have received a black eye.

One Friday night, after standing around the edge of the dance floor doing nothing but trying to look cool, I finally worked up the courage to ask a particular young lady if she would "like to." As we stepped out on the floor, I very gingerly took her hand and then swung around so that the two of us stood chest to chest, a phrase I could never have said out loud. I slid my arm around her and put my hand on her back. That felt brazen and intimate to me, but everyone around us was doing the same and so far no one had been arrested.

I felt brilliant about my accomplishment, until I realized I was expected to make conversation. "Would you like to" was used up and at this point certainly not appropriate. "Nice weather," seemed banal, even to me, and "How's school?" might not be successful if she had just failed an exam.

Finally, thinking it would be safe, I tried, "How's your mother?"

"What?" said my surprised partner. "Do you know her?"

"No, I just thought that... ah .. we all need to care about our parents."

The conversation didn't go much further.

But eventually a girl came along who stayed in my arms after the dance ended, a girlfriend. With her, my social abilities quickly expanded, although they were never to be a natural fit.

My wife has been the major influence of my life and has taught me the important things. Not just social graces, but about love and loyalty and selflessness. I am not an apt student, and often not even appreciative. But I am convinced I found the right teacher.

And we're still dancing, in one way or another, a dance we hope to continue for the rest of our lives.

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