



## Explorations in Intimacy

My first brush with the sublime and at times torturous Argentine Tango left me instantly captivated and soon hooked. The parallels between this sensual dance and my training and practice as a psychotherapist increasingly intrigue me. At the heart of both is the connection between two people. Each allows the possibility of experiencing and communicating a great range of emotions. Success at both requires skill, trust, empathy, and the ability to be intimate; and both are structured within clear boundaries which make this intimacy and contact safe and possible.

Argentine Tango is the only partner dance which is completely improvised. The leader - usually the man - proposes steps by subtle movements of his body, and the follower moves with him as she feels and interprets his lead. Both partners must be focussed in the moment, grounded in themselves and open and receptive to the other. The variables – partner, music, mood, outfit or venue – influence the dance in different ways, as well as combinations of steps that are unique to every dance. The result is the creation of something incredibly alive. Tango, as Petruska Clarkson wrote of Gestalt Therapy, is something ‘both different from and much more than the sum of its parts’<sup>i</sup>.

Many of the qualities required of a therapist are needed to dance the tango. To do either well I must be authentically myself. In the words of tango maestro Ricardo Vidort on how best to dance: ‘practice to be yourself and not a copy of anybody else’<sup>ii</sup>. I must also bring the whole of myself to the experience and surrender to and trust the process. Much like the deep personal growth and absorption of certain fundamental skills achieved over the course of a therapeutic training, to dance the tango well some core

principles must be learned and concepts understood. Only once these principles are imbibed can they be forgotten and the dance really flow.

### A language without words

Tango is a language without words, a conversation of bodies which allows the possibility of connecting deeply with another person as well as with oneself. Leaders must communicate clearly the complexities of the dance to their partner, judge their skill level and decide which steps can be taken and at what speed. Similarly a therapist must communicate clearly and assess a client’s level of ability to cope and anticipate how far and when to challenge them - or not. The art and skill of the follower is to stay receptive and attuned to the movements of their partner, translating the subtlest of cues to understand what is being communicated.

In many ways working with a client in therapy most closely resembles the follower’s role. I try to move with a client allowing them the freedom to dance to their own private tune while getting in synch with their tempo and the emotions they are expressing; staying present at all times. This is not a passive role, just as in the dance a follower will influence, guide, adjust and sometimes take the lead.

There is no need to distinguish between activities when we look at considerations such as whether we decide against moving forward if our partner is not ready. Or how we respond if our partner takes three steps unexpectedly when we aren’t ready. What about those moments when we stumble or, heaven forbid, fall? How do we mess up? How do we re-establish trust? Sensitivity and how to best make use of oneself as a tool are the key to both dancing and therapy.

### **Connection and awareness**

Two main principles of tango are connection to the music and connection to the ground. The dance must take place within a deep and reverent connection to the music. Being held by the music works as a metaphor for the context of an individual's life within psychotherapy - all aspects must be considered: from social and political circumstances to family structures and even the weather. Ignoring the bigger picture of someone's world is like dancing out of time or to a different tune.

For therapist and dancer staying grounded is essential. Tango dancers must be more than metaphorically in touch with the ground. The best dancers have a quality of moving effortlessly while at the same time staying connected to the ground and from there connecting with their partner. Equally important is to remain on one's own axis and balanced. In the same way a therapist must stay centred and grounded when starting a journey with a client. They will continually engage in the fine balancing act of how far towards or away from a client they can move, before they risk metaphorically falling over. I have heard it said of Marty Fromm that one of the qualities that made her such a great therapist was her presence – regardless of what was thrown at her, she stayed steadfastly rock solid and unshakable. The client like a dance partner needs to know they can count on their therapist to remain solid, upright and connected to them.

Dancing tango provides an ongoing opportunity to practice the Gestalt principle of awareness. For followers, the improvised nature of the dance and the fact it is almost completely led means it is necessary to remain open and receptive throughout. When I follow my senses are alert to every nerve-ending in my body: feeling; receiving; absorbing. I am similarly switched on

in a first session with a client. When 'in the zone' I am present, alive, focussed, yet often free of conscious thought. Tango is a form of moving meditation. Leaders must be present in the moment while also able to anticipate or plan the next step – the equivalent of holding a bifocal perspective in therapy; holding the 'here and now' as well as the bigger picture.

While it has been shown that living in the present moment appears to promote happiness<sup>iii</sup>, being fully in the moment and not knowing what is coming next can also feel at times both uncomfortable and scary. Pema Chödrön describes the present moment as 'a pretty vulnerable place'<sup>iv</sup>, acknowledging how unnerving as well as completely tender this can be. The ability to tolerate the vulnerability of not-knowing where the next step on a journey with another person might take you is vital for dancers and for therapists. Staying with what is can also be incredibly intimate.

### **Intimacy**

Tango is widely regarded as the most intimate of all partner dances. I usually dance with my face touching my partner's cheek, our chests in contact, arms embracing, free hands held. At first this proximity seemed strange and unnatural. At times with a new partner I have felt fear during our first dance. Can we really be this close, hearts beating together, smelling each other, sweat mingling, moving as one? The dance can be extremely exposing. It is raw and close, at times painfully uncomfortable, and yet delicious, terrible, sublime.

Most intimate of all can be moments of stillness: hanging suspended in an embrace with another being in a pause in the music, waiting. A beginner therapist or dancer may rush to fill the silence. I can recall many times I've done both. Experience and an inner confidence lead to an

ability to hold oneself and stay with another in a place of stillness and just be.

For therapists intimacy arises when facing a relative stranger, eyes meeting, hearing details of a life and thoughts which may never have been shared previously. This intimacy is both a privilege and a responsibility. It is a skill to sit with the discomfort that real intimacy can bring, retaining an awareness of external realities - boundaries, time, the client's history - while staying attentive, engaged and present; able to tolerate the unknown while maintaining a connection.

I would argue it is only because tango and psychotherapy take place under such artificial circumstances that this degree of intimacy is possible. In tango unwritten codes of conduct and a sense of ritual ensure adequate physical and emotional safety on and off busy dance floors. Physical contact although considerable is restricted to the dance embrace. 'Lines of dance' minimise collisions. Simply by averting or holding eye contact (the 'cabeceo') an agreement to dance can be made or avoided, thus sparing public humiliation. Saying thank you at the end of any track is a way to politely end the contract to dance and either partner may do this at any time if they feel uncomfortable. Such clear boundaries create the framework for an incredible intimacy to be reached in seconds, and allow enough trust to be established to freely and safely embrace strangers.

Firm, clear boundaries have an equally important function in psychotherapy. Time, location and cost are agreed upon. Confidentiality is assured and the limits of the relationship should be clear. Within these parameters the client can use the space as they need to and in time feel safe enough to explore anything. Any boundary, however, is only as strong as its weakest link. It

is partly the tension created by the ever-present possibility within both dance and therapeutic relationship that at any moment a boundary could be overstepped or ignored that keeps both processes fresh and alive - and which allows the potential results to seem so precious. Contradictory as it may seem, the restrictions boundaries impose on us actually create the possibility for an experience of great liberation.<sup>v</sup>

When I embrace a new dance partner the same process of discernment is being enacted as when a client starts therapy. As a therapist, client or dancer these are questions I consider in the dynamics between any partner and myself: how do we connect? Is my partner rough or gentle in our shared intimacy? How do I feel with them? Will they wait for me; do they pause and consider? Are they tender? Do they allow me to take the lead? Am I blamed or criticised if I head in a different direction to that expected? Do we move with grace and confidence or are we tentative and awkward together? Do I feel safe, held, supported, listened to, and met? How might my partner answer these questions in relation to me....?

### **Trust**

Trust is intrinsic to successful dancing or therapy. In tango the leader must guide his partner safely through the stiletto-clad heels of surrounding dancers, while a follower must be ready to respond in a split-second and stay with him even with eyes shut. Enough trust must exist or the dance will always be compromised. The same is absolutely true with therapist and client. Trust is crucial to forming a good therapeutic relationship, understood to be the most important factor (over which a therapist has influence) of a successful outcome in therapy<sup>vi</sup>.

In the arms of a skilful and trusted leader I have danced track after track with my eyes shut, lost

in a beautiful connection. It is a powerful experience to surrender control, and choose to be vulnerable in the arms of a stranger. The dance itself contains the possibility of being deeply therapeutic. Learning to trust and form a connection is the main theme of many therapeutic relationships. The therapeutic alliance is like the other fundamental principle of tango: connection to your partner. Without it the dance may have a mechanically predictable quality - two individuals going through the motions but essentially dancing on their own. Connection requires both partners to share of themselves and surrender to the process of creation between them. In therapy the same is true. For real work to happen both individuals must be engaged, and willing to look inside themselves. A therapist who merely asks rote questions and gives stock responses without a real connection to their client is engaging in a soulless and ultimately meaningless therapy.

The sensation of moving with another being, absolutely in the moment, experiencing an almost telepathic quality of connection, is profound. Tango provides the possibility to experience the state of flow described by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi<sup>vii</sup>. This sense of absorption and channelled focus, of being at one with one's inner state and one's actions allows for an experience of reverie and spontaneous joy which is the antithesis of depression. Such states of being can be transformative.

For me tango and psychotherapy are inextricably linked. Both feel like lifelong journeys. I may well retire from working with clients one day, but the commitment to living my life searching the depths of my awareness and connecting with the solidity of my inner experience will always be there. And I intend to dance tango as long as I can walk. My experiences on both journeys have enriched my life profoundly and provided

insights and awarenesses which feel fundamental to how I bring myself to connect with others, and which are intrinsic to fulfilling contact in dance, in therapy and in life.

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<sup>iii</sup> Killingsworth MA, Gilbert DT. A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. *Science*. 2010 Nov; 330 (6006):932

<sup>iv</sup> Chödrön P. When things fall apart. London and Boston: Shambhala Publications; 1997

<sup>v</sup> This experience is celebrated from the therapist's point of view in Terry Cooper's paper Responsibility: The Great Freedom. Copies available on request from [info@spectrumtherapy.co.uk](mailto:info@spectrumtherapy.co.uk)

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