

Shortly following the watershed moment that launched the “me-too” era, revelations were posted on Facebook regarding sexual pressure, unhealthy relationships, and sexual predation at my local contra dance. Those revelations led to extensive and on-going discussion of safety (especially sexual and emotional safety) at contra dance events.

In thinking about this problem (contra dances NOT feeling safe), and striving to discuss it without age-ism, sexism, or any other kind of -ism, I’ve honed in on a focus on culture. I’ve found it helpful to distinguish between “Community Culture” and “Nightclub Culture.” This is especially in response to accusations against organizers, or The Board as an entity, for failing to provide a safe environment.

The following is the meat of my Facebook response on that thread: For quick reading, the most salient points are highlighted.

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By Diane Silver, Nov. 2017

.... How did we allow this to happen? Well, what used to be a community culture at contra dances has evolved over time into a night-club atmosphere, where dancers see themselves as patrons, paying a fee for service, and do not view themselves as responsible for the event by virtue of being a participant. Contrast paying a cover charge to go to a club vs. a group of friends who want to have a music and dance party. They all pitch in to cover costs, but no one is “in charge.” They are all in charge together.

Our contra community is just that – a community. The entire group of regular dancers sets the tone and culture of the event each week. It is not reasonable to put all that responsibility on the board, and no one would serve on the board if it carried that kind of culpability. If inappropriate behavior happens at the dance, the board has a process for responding. But sexual predation goes way beyond the dance.

Over the last 15-ish years, a sub-community has evolved of mostly younger dancers. They may first meet each other at the dance, but they do a lot of outside socializing, and that’s where the bad stuff happens (sexual pressure, etc). Then, if something goes sour, they apparently get ostracized and emotionally bullied AT the dance, by their supposed friends. But the power dynamic is not obvious to outside observers in other lines. I see everyone milling around to get their next partner (or probably booking ahead). It’s not obvious that someone is being bullied or ostracized. And it’s definitely not obvious who is sleeping with whom after the last waltz. The Board does not chaperone dates, hook-ups, or outside parties, so predation is not necessarily clear to organizers. To say “everyone knew” is limited to perhaps everyone in this sub-group; definitely not the whole “Community”.

But while the actual predation happens outside the dance, it feeds off of the sub-culture AT the dance, and that is the root of the problem. With the evolution of this sub-community, the culture at our dance has shifted from a community culture to a night-club culture that is highly sexualized and highly insular, at least for that line.

We have struggled with this little culture war for a long time. Many women over 35 have left the dance community as it has become more and more partner-centric and it’s hard to get a partner if you’re not “hot enough” (night-club attitude). Dancers in the “door line” (participants in the night-club culture) don’t want to hear anything from “community” dancers that smacks of criticizing their style or telling them how to dance, much less how to behave off the dance floor.

Over the years, many folks have worked hard to influence the culture of our larger dance community in a more positive direction. They have initiated alternative events, such as a Family Dance, and our wonderful English Country Dance, and our relatively new Roots Contra dance, which is an intentional effort to foster a more traditional, community-oriented contra experience. The board has supported these efforts, which is critical for success, but the initiative comes from the community. At the Thursday dance, many dancers make a concerted effort to mix around, support beginners, and dance respectfully. But that culture in the door line is hard to overcome.

As this night-club culture evolved, the board could have imposed paternalistic policies. They could have banned full-body-contact swinging, and set a bare minimum dress code (literally – how much bare skin is acceptable). But they didn’t. Asheville is a progressive, creative, free-spirited community, and this is generally an adult event. I really can’t imagine such a dance-police approach being well received. Maybe that should have been done, in hindsight, but can you imagine the vitriolic pushback that would have occurred?

High school students have a level of protection at school which we don't have in the adult world. We don't have paid staff to counsel teens on their dating choices. **Our all-volunteer board can and does help facilitate when bad behavior occurs at the dance.** We have procedures and literature and "dance buddies"; we identify the Board members as the "go-to" people if you have a complaint, and we make announcements about individual boundaries, and everything else we can think of to promote a safe atmosphere. **But the Board are not trained counselors, and it's not their job to intervene with people's personal relationships.**

**Part of learning to be a grown-up is learning how to handle social pressure. I think that in general, the contra dance community is actually a great place to learn and practice social skills – much safer and more supportive than many other arenas in the larger adult world; a safe and healthy place for dancers from 2 to 92, where teenagers can learn from exemplary multi-generational interaction.** But at our dance, what historically was a community environment has evolved into this night-club scene, at least for that sub-group, and so it is not as safe for high school teens as it used to be.

**If we want to create a safe environment, especially for young dancers, then we need to change the over-sexualized and insulated culture that has evolved. There have been a lot of comments asking what the Board is going to do about this. That's the wrong question. The only people who can change the culture are the ones who contribute to it. It should not be, *what is the Board, or the organizer, going to do to make the dance a safe space?* The question is, *what are YOU going to do to make the dance a safe space? What are YOU going to do to counteract the over-sexualized atmosphere and insular interaction?*** This is not something that any organizer can accomplish from a policy or administrative approach. We have tried for 15 years. It has to be a choice by the dancers who attend, who are creating the night-club atmosphere in the first place. **It is up to each individual to police their own dance style, considering who might be watching (9, 10, 11 year olds?) and what kind of message it sends.**

I applaud everyone who is talking about this and seems ready to be part of the solution. **May I humbly suggest that a great start to fixing this problem would be for the door-line to dissolve and for everyone to mix willingly in all the lines.** If some of the young dancers got to know some of the older, honorable dancers, they might find sources of support if they are feeling bullied by their so-called friends. And they might form mentor-type friendships that could be really helpful. I know, every now and then, there's a "creepy old guy," but they really are few and far between, and that kind of stuff can be addressed -- both with those individuals, and also by young dancers learning from older mentors how to set and defend their personal boundaries. We do deal with inappropriate behavior AT the dance. But this is different. This stems from activity beyond the dance, supported by a sub-group creating a toxic culture and keeping it insulated from the larger community. So for all the people who are so shocked and sorry, and want to know how to prevent this in the future, I have a very concrete answer: **support community culture and don't support clique culture. Don't book ahead, and don't run across the hall to catch a suitable hottie for the next dance. Just turn to whoever's closest and ask them to dance. Dance with people of all ages and skill levels and dance in different lines throughout the evening. And consider saving the highly sexual dance flourishes for actual night-clubs that have age limits. THAT is what will create a safer dance community.**

As we continue to work to shift our culture back to a healthy community environment, please remember that the board are just a bunch of dancers, like you, who have stepped up to help run the dance. The Board is not "in loco parentis," and can't police potential situations where something could go wrong, but it hasn't yet, and/or no one has asked for their involvement. ... In creating a safer space in the future, it would be inappropriate for the board to butt into people's private business before a complaint is lodged. The dance should certainly be a safe space, but the board doesn't control the dance. They manage the administration, and respond to concrete complaints, but they can't control the subtle culture. They can only encourage it. It's a community event and is the joint responsibility of all who attend.

This is why **it is so important that women (everyone, but especially women) feel safe to speak out, and to do so immediately.** Hooray if that is finally happening. We are (hopefully) in a major shift in our larger society of finally acknowledging and responding to horrific behavior in our work places, and among our political and entertainment elite. **I hope the newfound awareness will be enduring, with a new culture of admiration, rather than shame, for those who speak up, and due process for those accused.**

And I hope that this watershed moment in our dance community will result in real and lasting change in our own culture. I hope we can commit to social norms that come from the community, not top-down from the board. I hope we can break down the barriers between sub-groups and become a more holistic community. I hope those who have been reading and participating in these threads will feel personally responsible for being part of that change, and will **lead by example.**