

THE TAO OF CONNECTION

By Jane Hascall

Purpose: Through the lens of learning and practicing a discipline to examine the metaphors and insights we discover about ourselves our lives and our work. In this article I will use my own experience with ballroom dance to ponder this question:

“Have you ever undertaken a discipline or practice that uncovered deeper truths about yourself and your ways of being in the world, including how you consult with your clients?”

Initial Situation:

My husband had a stroke two years before he died, and I was his *caregiver*. He was a big guy and I am very small, but we managed, mostly, though one day he had a seizure in the bathtub and nearly drowned. I held his head above water while calling 911, talking to him, and waiting for the ambulance to come.

So many of us, and our clients, live in situations where what is required of us is almost beyond our physical ability and emotional capacity.

When he died I experienced a sense of release, tinged with guilt for feeling it. And I experienced grief, grief for my vibrant, loving husband who was so wounded for so long, and grief for me that I lost him. I did not experience hope for any future at all.

So many of us, and our clients, experience a sense of relief and a twinge of guilt when moving on, either by choice or circumstance. Maybe the client relationship is ending, or the business is in bankruptcy, or ... the way it has been is over. And there is no sense of “what’s next”?

It was a long time or a short time, as the fairy tales say, before I emerged from the fog I *had* entered. Like Sleeping Beauty, I was under a canopy, not present in my life, but sealed away.

So many of us feel this, or have a client or even an organization we consult, that for all intents and purposes, is “asleep”. There is no goal to generate energy, there is no desire to change or do anything new or different. In this fog, possibilities sink into oblivion, become invisible.

Movement at Last:

Finally I became aware of my longing to go for a long cruise. I could lie in my bed and let the sea rock me to sleep. I might read a book, but undisturbed rest, and being rocked by the mother, was my first goal.

Early in the cruise I was invited one afternoon to the Captain's reception for "single and unaccompanied guests". I had no idea what to expect but showed up, nicely but not elegantly dressed. When I arrived I noticed beautifully dressed couples dancing but didn't pay much attention. But before I could even sit down, a handsome, smiling man pulled me onto the dance floor and began whirling me around the edges. I was surprised into acquiescence and later learned that the cruise ship employs 10 or 12 accomplished dance hosts to dance with women guests.

I wonder how often our clients experience us like the dance host. We arrive, full of life and mission, and literally pull them into the dance. We are a shock to their system, energy pouring into and disturbing their conserve.

In my case, I decided I had plenty of time to rest and be rocked, and I would also learn to ballroom dance. I am a savvy, educated, experienced, and extremely competent person. I was not this person in the dance class; I was incompetent. I had not danced since high school. Even the vocabulary being used to teach me made no sense to me.

How many of our clients don't understand our words, or the concepts behind our words? How many go blindly forward because they are in a fog. Perhaps they come to meetings and do our assigned tasks (listen to the interview data, set goals...) because there is no energy to even say "go away". With luck, deep down in the person or the organization there is a longing to dance that gets them up and moving. The life force is deep; how might we all trust it more?

The Three-Legged Stool of the Dance:

I learned on shipboard that the foundation of ballroom dance is a "three legged stool".

(1) The spine forms a frame to give strength to support one's body. When I walk onto the floor, my spine straightens. This is a physical change in the body before it is a metaphor. I am a vertical being, my head up, my feet down, and everything between aligned to my spine. I become the frame for the dance, my core strong enough for my partner to hold. I became strong enough to hold my loss, my grief.

(2) It is essential to balance connection between oneself and one's dance partner. It is my natural instinct to "lead". In order to connect to my partner I had to give up this natural strength. I had to become vulnerable, at first to being directed in the steps, but the goal is that no one is leading all the time, you are one connected being, moving together, taking turns leading and following.

(3) One also must connect to the "floor". Even though I am lifting my arms, and my energy is rising along my straight spine, I must also "ground" myself, feel the energy also move in the other direction, into the earth. I discovered I tend to spend time stuck in my head. Cognitive strength took me a long way in life,

brought me rewards. It is hard to give that up, and feel incompetent about finding my feet and the ground.

These are comprehensible words, but I was learning what they meant in my body. And what do I do? I am not a natural dancer; it is difficult for me to learn new steps. Under stress (new steps, mistakes, etc.) I freeze, withdraw, become ungrounded. Asked to learn the steps of widowhood, I withdraw and board a ship, in a fog, to be rocked to sleep. Instead of connection, I tend to lose the rhythm of the dance, not only on the dance floor, but in life.

Do you remember the title "Teaching the Elephant to Dance?" That is what we consultants do, but, I think, rarely from the place of being in deep connection to the tao of the elephant, of letting the elephant partner. Its weight allows it to know a lot about being connected to the floor.

Mastery of Incompetence:

It turns out that my incompetence is a gift. If I am going to learn to dance, I must detach myself from myself, and surrender. I must embrace "beginner's mind". Zen Master Shunryo Suzuki wrote, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few." Beginner's mind is a concept in Zen Buddhism called "Shoshin." Shoshin means having an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions when studying a subject, even when studying at an advanced level. Achieving "beginner's mind" was not hard in learning to dance because I really was a beginner. It is when I think I "know" that my mind closes.

How many times do we encounter clients who believe they already know the answer, who want us to confirm their them in their "rightness"? How many times do we enter a system convinced that we already know the answer, rather than entering with our beginner's mind?

When I returned home, I *remembered that years before I had taken two Aikido workshops from master George Leonard, who coincidentally died the same week I embarked on my cruise. From George I learned about the principles of mastery. There is a mastery level of ballroom dance. Here are a few behaviors necessary to reach mastery:*

- Surrender to your teacher and the demands of your discipline.
- Be willing to look the fool
- Satisfaction resides in mindful repetition, the discovery of endless richness in subtle variations on familiar themes.
- Very important: There are times when one must give up hard-won competency in order to advance to the next stage. This is especially true when you are stuck at a familiar and comfortable skill level.
- You must practice for the sake of practice, not for the achievement of a goal.

As consultants I wonder how often we, our partner and our self, detach from outcome, and let the tao of our connection lead us? Do we dance together in a state of mutual surrender, with ourselves, and with the organization?

I am fortunate that when I returned from the cruise I found a dance instructor with talent, skill, enormous patience, and great humor. He is helping me learn to detach from outcomes.

As consultants our patience and humor may be as important as our talent and skill.

Capacity for Joy:

As I explore my incompetence I also discover my strengths. I recognize and now honor my enormous capacity for persistence, my refusal to give up, even when dismayed, embarrassed, and discouraged. Persistence is an element of my frame, a core strength. An old Japanese saying, used by many martial artists to represent *Tamashii* or Indomitable Spirit, is "*Nana-Korobi, Ya-Okii*," which translates as "Fall down seven times and stand up eight."

Another strength is that once I've "got it", I've got it. And I notice "getting it" often happens almost immediately after feeling deeply discouraged, feeling ready to "give up." This is a recurring theme in my life, from childhood through today. The difference is that now I have an awareness of this thread that is woven through the fabric of my life.

*Every wakeful step, every mindful act is the direct path to awakening.
Wherever you go, there you are." - Buddha*

Lastly, I want to tell you that through learning to dance I reconnected to my capacity for joy. In those moments when I am not stumbling, scared, and klutzy, when I am dancing well, feeling grounded, strong in my core, connected to my partner and to the floor (grounded), joy suffuses my entire being, I feel free, feel like I am flying, feel I can do---almost---anything. This, for me, is mastery. Until the next time I stumble. And then the dance begins again.

There is a saying about ballroom dance, "When you stumble, make it part of the dance." Dancing is not about covering up a mistake or "faking it". It's about embracing the stumble/the mistake as a part of the dance, the learning process, mastery. Embracing mistakes as part of learning and life.

What if consulting is about our clients and our stumbling, about embracing of our mistakes, and our learning from them, at least as much as it is in achieving visible success?

Conclusion:

My goal in this article was to explore this question:

“Have you ever undertaken a discipline or practice that uncovered deeper truths about yourself and your ways of being in the world, including how you consult with your clients?”

I used my own experience of exploring the discipline of ballroom dancing and my application of what I am learning to my consulting practice. Now I encourage you to remember or explore your own discipline, and ponder what it teaches you about your consulting practice.

Then tell us about your discovery, perhaps on the ACI blog or present a program on your own Tao of Connection.