

“It’s All about People”
Ron Partin’s Keynote Speech
National Square Dance Convention
Charlotte, 2007

I first tried square dancing as a 15-year-old kid growing up in Kalida, Ohio. Kalida is a small farm community of about 1,000 people — 99 percent of them being German Catholic. I was one of the few who weren’t.

During my junior year, the local priest Father Lochtefeld began offering Saturday night square dance lessons to all the high school juniors and seniors. Part of his motivation was to keep us kids from the evils of dancing to rock and roll music.

Even though I wasn’t Catholic, I attended just about every dance for two years as a welcome guest. There wasn’t much else happening — so I tagged along with my friends. The priest hired a caller who taught us about a dozen square dance calls.

I recall we did a lot of allemande lefts, do-si-dos, and, grand right- and lefts — but most of all I loved the swings and promenades. We had to put our arms around the girls as we promenaded. . . . Be still my heart! As a painfully shy Protestant boy in a very German Catholic community, I didn’t get many chances to touch girls. Every time I put my arm around a girl my pulse doubled! Those dances became the highlight of my high school social life. I loved every minute of it! It was great fun — and mostly I remember we laughed a lot.

The main insight I gained from that experience was that I loved dancing . . . and that dancing was a great way to meet girls. So, when I entered college, I taught myself to dance — to the evil rock-and-roll music. There wasn’t a lot of square dancing going on college campuses in the 1960s.

For the next 35 years, the only square dancing my wife Jan and I did was at occasional hometown weddings — where square dancing was a highlight of many Kalida wedding receptions — though limited to the essential dozen or so calls everyone pretty-well knew. It was mostly what I now call “extreme square dancing” — the kind where the more enthusiastic males occasionally swung the girls right off the floor.

Only after moving to the mountains of Western North Carolina seven years ago, did we realize that organized square dancing was alive and well. Within a month after arriving we were signed up for a class — the result of seeing a demo dance at the local senior citizens club.

We are all here today because we love square dancing, or round dancing, or contra dancing, or clogging. Face it — we’ve all got happy feet! We love to dance — and we want to see our favorite dance form survive for future generations to enjoy.

We fret a lot about declining numbers and the future of our beloved variety of dancing. “Will baby boomers join in square dancing?” seems to be the most frequent question at these annual conventions. Virtually every keynote speaker is bound to ponder the issue.

I salute the hard work of our leaders who are sincerely concerned about the future of square dancing. Will people still be square dancing 20 years from now? . . . I’m pretty certain they will — in some form. No one can really predict for certain the number.

Ten years ago, I predicted that both poker and bridge were dying out — because

the young people were not learning to play either. Then along came televised Texas Hold ‘em Tournaments. Now millions of young men – and women – know how to play poker — for better or worse.

Ballroom Dancing is cool again. Teenagers as well as senior citizens are crowding classes to learn to rumba, fox trot, and waltz. Richard Gere and Jennifer Lopez in “Shall We Dance?” and ABC's "Dancing with the Stars” inspired millions from 10 to 90 to hit the dance floor again. This year, over 12,000 New York City middle-school students are learning to ballroom dance, with many participating in citywide competitions.

What square dancing really needs is a great movie! The closest I’ve seen is an Advil commercial a few months ago. It’s a start! If you know any producers or screenwriters, get working on them. They could be our heroes! I’m pushing for Leonardo Decaprio and Angelina Jolie for the lead roles — though that is negotiable.

Just as dancing today differs from what I experienced in high school 40 some years ago, it will continue to evolve. It will adapt to the needs and interests of the Baby Boomers and subsequent generations. I can’t predict what these changes will be — though if I had to guess, I suspect they will include many of the current experiments like ABC Dances, multi-cycle teaching, maybe fewer calls, getting students on the dance floor sooner, and toning down the emphasis on traditional square dance attire.

The Callerlab surveys have provided valuable information for the preservation and promotion of square dancing. And every national convention provides excellent workshops and seminars where successful ideas are exchanged. We must continue to encourage this exchange of ideas on what works and to experiment in our own clubs. I do hope you have taken advantage of the outstanding selection of educational programs available here this year.

To resist change is normal — only babies like change. Survival of our favorite dance form — whether it is square, round, contra, or clogging will demand that we not only accept but that we actively nurture and promote healthy change.

Folks, trust me; we are not dealing with great moral issues here. There is nothing sacred about the number of calls to be taught to beginning dancers or the clothes they should wear. True, there is value in preserving some traditions and there may well be groups in 50 years dancing and looking exactly as we do today — though I suspect that will not likely be the norm.

Most all social organizations are experiencing declining numbers. Yes, baby boomers are different. They are looking for recreation — not another job. They are more reluctant to make long-term commitments.

If you are used to dancing to 130 some square dance calls, could you have as much fun dancing to 90 or 75 calls? Can we say the folks dancing the Mainstream hall are having less fun than those in the Plus Hall? I sure hear a lot of laughing and see any smiles in both. Therein lies the rub. How do we make dancing appealing to new folks, while not making it boring to those who have already mastered it. An important point to ponder: “When you go fishing, bait the hook with what the fish likes, not what you like.”

The key to survival of any social activity group — whether it is bowling, bridge, or bingo is its success in meeting the needs of its potential participants. People are

constantly tuned to their favorite radio station WII-FM — What's In It For Me?

The things that motivated me to attend those square dances in St. Michael's church basement in high school are still essential in drawing people to any social activity — fun and friendship. It has to be fun to survive. A leisure activity that does not give enjoyment is likely to have few followers.

The biggest difference today is that there is a whole lot more competition. In Kalida, Father Lochtefeld's dances were about the only game in town on Saturday nights. Today we have an ever-growing array of activities competing for our leisure time and dollar. We must compete with 200 cable television channels. Social activity groups that publicize themselves most effectively are likely to survive.

Our best road to success is to do everything in our power to make dancing so much fun that our members will want to come back again and again and bring their friends with them.

While many things are beyond our control, we can influence two of the more important things that keep people coming back — fun and fellowship! If we have a good time and feel welcome, we are more likely to want to stay with dancing and to put effort into building our clubs.

Alfred Lord Tennyson suggested, "I am a part of all whom I have met." This suggests that every person I encounter in life in some way influences who I become. And in turn I have an impact on the lives of all those I meet. Obviously those whom I know best — my family and friends — have the biggest impact. But even that rude shoe clerk I met five years ago made some small impact — like placing grains of sand on a balance scale.

To illustrate that point, I'd like to perform an experiment. Watch what happens as I suspend this cup in the air — and release it! . . . It falls straight to the floor!

I've done this experiment hundreds of times and never once has it gone up and hit the ceiling. You're sitting there saying, "Of course, dummy! It's gravity." You're right. You're wise and educated. But gravity works just the same for an aborigine in the middle of Australia who may never have taken a science class — or even have a word for gravity. It doesn't matter whether you believe in it or not. "I don't believe in gravity!" Sorry it's there whether you've studied it or believe in it. It is a law of the universe. The more we know about gravity, the more we can use it to our advantage — and avoid hurting ourselves.

There are other rules of the universe that affect our lives — whether we are aware of them or not. One such rule is the *Rule Of Consequences*. It suggests that we do what we do in our lives — me, you, all your fellow dancers — because of the consequences — that is, what comes afterwards.

Quite simply, those activities that result in pleasant consequences tend to be repeated. Those that lead to unpleasant consequences tend not to be repeated.

Most importantly, you have no choice as to whether or not you will influence another person. The fact that you are in the same room together means you will be providing consequences to each other — whether you want to or not.

For example, if you as standing at the door as a new student or guest enters and you smile and say, "It's great to see you. I'm so glad you're here. Please come on in and

have a great time,” you have influenced their attitude toward your club, how much they like you, and the probability that they will return.

On the other hand, if you scowl, and grumble, “Hurry up and get in a square. We’re ready to start. I hate those prairie dresses. Don’t you have anything more western? Do you want to be club president next year?” You have influenced their attitude toward your club, how much they like you, and the probability that they will return again.

Suppose you choose to totally ignore them. You turn your back on them and walk away. Sorry, that is the most painful consequence of all — to not be acknowledged. You may be lucky if they even stay, let alone return.

And the point is it is not whether you intended it or not. True you may have a terrible headache, just had an argument with your partner on the way to the dance, or just accidentally erased your computer hard drive. What counts in influencing others’ behaviors is not your intentions — only how the other person sees it.

Wouldn’t it be great if some days we could wear a sign around our necks that read, “I don’t really mean it today.” But it doesn’t work that way. Actions speak louder than words. How we treat both our students and our guests greatly shapes the future of square dancing.

We are all sometimes unintentionally uninviting. When we race past a guest to square up with a friend, we are unwittingly planting some unpleasant consequences.

Think back to your very first dance – when you were petrified that you were going to do something really stupid. Walking onto a dance floor as a new dancer or a guest can be a very uncomfortable experience, especially for us introverts.

I suspect some of you are curious about why an introvert is speaking in front of a group like this. In my youth, I was painfully shy. Over the years I learned to act like an extrovert on the job — mostly by doing the things I feared the most — like public speaking. True I still get the butterflies, but now I have them flying in formation.

Being inviting is not just the job of your club’s dance hosts or your board. In successful clubs, it becomes everybody’s job. They create a genuine culture of warmth and fun.

We must not tolerate rudeness in our clubs. Do all you can to make your fellow members aware of how their behaviors can be unintentionally uninviting. True, you cannot change your fellow member’s basic personalities. A few folks are just inclined to be crabby, critical, or self-centered. Yet, we must do all we can to counteract and minimize the influence of a few negative people.

I think one of the most significant reasons members choose to quit clubs is hurt feelings. In the caller lab survey of members who had dropped out of square dancing, cliquishness and politics were given as major reasons for quitting. Remember we tend to avoid those things that provide unpleasant consequences.

Another way of thinking about it is that each member of your club has a psychological bank account with every other member. We make deposits when we are kind, welcoming, or helpful. We make withdrawals when we are uninviting or rude — and most importantly, when we ignore those around us. True, sometimes we will be unintentionally uninviting. But if we have built relationships by making deposits, we may be forgiven for a few withdrawals.

The relationships we have formed off the dance floor have been one of the most

rewarding outcomes of being part of a square dancing club. One Saturday last fall, 40 members of our club participated in a Habitat for Humanity Blitzbuild. Together we erected the framing for a house. Sweating and laughing together for a greater purpose enriched the connections we had already made on the dance floor.

There is one other behavior that can affect the climate of any organization — perfectionism.

Have you ever been accused of being perfectionists?
 Have you ever danced with a perfectionist?
 Do any of you live with a perfectionist?

As part of my academic career, I once studied the psychological effects of perfectionism. I can summarize six months of work in one sentence: “It aint’ good for you!” You pay a price for perfectionism. Perfectionists are highly critical and have unrealistic expectations of themselves and others.

My interest in perfection likely stems from being raised by a father who was in many ways a perfectionist. Nowhere was that less evident than in the post-mowing critique. He would come out and inspect my work: “You missed a spot over here, and you cut the corner a little sharp over there.”

So what! In the great scheme of life’s events how important is it really that I missed a strip going this way. Next week, I’ll mow the other direction and catch it.

I own my own lawn now — over an acre. The first thing I did when we bought it was to buy the biggest riding lawn mower I could afford — a John Deere. I can knock that lawn off in 50 minutes flat! It is not perfect, but it is good enough.

The point is that — contrary what many coaches, parents and teachers, have told you — not everything worth doing is worth doing well. For some things, good enough is okay. Fie, you say! Blasphemy!

If you doubt that point, think about this:

- When you go home at the end of the day, do you cook the best culinary creation you are capable of making?
- Before you left for this convention, did you make sure all the dust balls were out from under your bed?
- When you iron your sheets do you make sure all the You don’t iron your sheets!! I’m going to tell my wife I don’t have to then.

For some things in life good enough is good enough. For others good enough is unacceptable. For example, if you are an airline pilot, I want you to do the best you humanly possibly can — especially on take offs and landings.

Perfectionism is often driven by *stinkin’ thinkin’* — one form being the God-Scum way of viewing the world. It assumes that we must be either God-like and absolutely perfect or we are scum and no-good. There is no in-between. To have a failure is to be a failure. That is why some of my students would come in with tears in their eyes because they only scored a 99 on a test. Anything less than perfect is seen as failure.

One of the biggest problems is that perfectionism takes time. While we double and redouble our efforts to attain perfection, we take time from other activities that might

pay greater dividends. I'm not advocating sloppy workpersonship. Many things do require higher levels of effort and achievement. I'd like to offer a different perspective on success.

How many of you are golfers? Fess up.

What would be a perfect round of golf for 18 holes? (Pause) Right, 18! Eighteen consecutive holes-in-one. Indeed, there are 19 documented instances of golfers having two consecutive holes-in-one on the same round. There are no documented instances of anyone ever scoring three consecutive holes-in-one. You can pretty well assess the chances of a perfect round of golf of 18 ever occurring.

What would be an excellent round of golf? What is accepted standard of excellence? Par, of course — 72. But do you see the difference — between perfection and excellence — 18 versus 72. One is a neurotic dream that will drive you crazy in its pursuit. The other is a neurotic dream . . . that will drive you crazy in its pursuit!

My advice is to strive for EXCELLENCE not PERFECTION. Set realistic standards for yourself and others. It's a lot more fun and certainly less stressful.

Please, don't ever demand perfection from your students or fellow dancers. In fact, it is essential to not expect excellence from beginning dancers, though you hope they will someday become excellent dancers, but that level of achievement takes it takes time and experience to attain.

I would like to close by offering my free advice on how to achieve success and happiness — both on and off the dance floor.

Partin's Pithy Ponderables slideshow to music was presented here. It can be found online at ronpartin.com.

As you participate in this convention strive to absorb as many ideas as possible on how to intentionally make your dance club inviting, friendly, and fun.

Thank you for choosing to spend part of your day with me. Go forth and dance with happy feet.