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Fusion Dance: Exploring Identity and Social Possibilities

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# Table of Contents

Introduction: What is Fusion Dance? ................................................................. 2
Follow Me into a Night at Flow Fusion ............................................................... 4
A Way to Begin ..................................................................................................... 5
Learning to Dance with Shame ......................................................................... 7
Masterpieces of Discovery .................................................................................. 10
Meditations on Dance ......................................................................................... 13
Communication, Connection and Community .................................................. 15
Micro Fusion by Candlelight ............................................................................... 17
Disclaimer: This is a non-exhaustive introduction to fusion dance as I currently know it, for the purpose of providing enough context to viewers of this project, so that they can understand the circumstances in which it is situated. I speak from my experiences of exchanging insights with other fusion dancers and attending lessons and social dances multiple times per week over the past couple of years, but I do not speak for all fusion dancers nor am I in any way an authority on fusion. My perspective on fusion is shaped largely by my experiences as a late-/post-pandemic, fusion-first intermediate dancer who has danced fusion primarily in Bellingham, WA and secondarily in Seattle, WA and Vancouver, Canada.

Introduction: What is Fusion Dance?

In order to understand the project that follows, one must understand what fusion dancing is. Fusion dancers have tried to define and redefine fusion dance since its beginning, but they have not conclusively agreed upon a single definition, in large part because it is not a single, codified style with a strict set of steps or moves. Keeping in mind that I am by no means the first person to try and define fusion dance, I seek to describe what I’ve observed about it, not to declare an authoritative definition of what does or does not constitute it.

Fusion dance, also known simply as fusion, is a partner dance that originated in urban areas of the United States and has progressively spread to Canada, Europe and other parts of the world. Fusion dance scenes generally branched off from pre-existing partner dance scenes (such as those for blues, lindy hop and tango) in the early 2000s and 2010s, with the 2008 Houston Fusion Exchange (the first of a series of annual fusion conferences) playing a pivotal role in the establishment of fusion dance as an official concept. They display a non-traditional combination of dance styles/movements and music, which is generally contemporary.1 Like most other well-known partner dances in the present-day U.S., fusion primarily employs a lead-follow framework in pairs, whereby the lead (alternatively called the leader) primarily suggests moves for the pair and the follow (alternatively called the follower) primarily interprets the lead’s suggestions. However, its scenes also commonly normalize experimentation with less strict interpretations of the roles: dancers switching between roles between and/or during dances, dancers leading with one part of the body and simultaneously following with another, groups of more than two dancers employing constantly-shifting characteristics of lead and follow, etc. In line with this flexibility, it’s primarily a social dance (i.e. danced at social dance events) rather than a dance centering on competition, although competitions do sometimes occur on special occasions.2

Many fusion dancers have defined fusion as a combination of two or more existing styles; others have defined it as something broader such as fusing your movement with your partner’s and the

1 I’ve compiled a playlist of fusion dance videos at https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLujKIz5HFJIIra2f2JC0KK_sAVCGy1CfK.
2 I’ve compiled a playlist of fusion dance competition videos at https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLujKIz5HFJIIGXtL-Ts5h9dkIGtM4BBUu.
music\textsuperscript{3} or “Dancing in a way that expresses the music using whatever capacity for dance and movement the dance partnership has at its disposal\textsuperscript{4}” — with the general goal of communication via movement, which is closer to my own beliefs.

Every dance shared at a fusion event can feel very different from the next depending on your partner, your role and the music, among other factors. While looking around the room, the dancing that you see will vary widely, displaying different mixtures of elements from blues, lindy hop, tango, west coast swing, salsa, kizomba and any number of other partner dance styles.

One distinct substyle of fusion (and the only official one that I am currently aware of having a distinct name) is micro fusion, also known simply as micro. Micro fusion carries the ethos of fusion applied to dances of smaller and sparser movements.\textsuperscript{5} It focuses on body isolations (such as moving your shoulders, rib cage or hips in relative isolation) and purposeful stillness. In order to communicate tiny movements, it is normally danced in close embrace (a hug-like position, a variation of which is present in many other dances like tango, kizomba and others, which lend inspiration to micro). While its concepts have existed in one form or another in every partner dance, the first nationally-taught class for micro fusion (as an outgrowth of the blues dance revival) was introduced at the 2008 Houston Fusion Exchange by instructors based in the Pacific Northwest — which greatly influenced the official establishment of the style of dance we now know as micro fusion.

Fusion dance is continually, actively evolving (as are the ways in which people define and describe it), and the culture of its communities depends on the individual in them. That being said, fusion dance communities in the U.S. often share values of flexible creativity, consent and non-hierarchical collaboration. Fusion communities all across the nation (and world) shrunk as a result of the pandemic and, at least in my corner of the Pacific Northwest, are slowly regrowing and finding new footing in a post-pandemic world, and I’m excited to participate in shaping this new era of fusion dance.

\textsuperscript{3} Andrew Sutton, “Damon Stone & Andrew Sutton chat about Fusion - day 1 - inspired by the ‘roots’ statement,” YouTube, June 27, 2023, video, 3:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kq9bwJK_EoQ.


\textsuperscript{5} More information about and video examples of micro fusion can be found on the website for Bay Area Micro Fusion (BAmF): https://bamf.dance/video.
Follow Me into a Night at Flow Fusion

The Karate Church feels like the quintessential fusion dance venue, even if its destiny as such was only realized a little more than a year ago. Originally, it was a church — as evidenced by its steeple reaching toward the heavens; then, it became a karate dojo — which left its legacy in the iconic, bold red capital letters “BELLINGHAM ACADEMY OF ELF DEFENSE” on its side (the “s” in “self-defense” having fallen off long ago); later, it became an alternative library (bringing new meaning to the “elf” part of its designation, with tales of elves and other supernatural beings among its thousands of tomes) and now it is a venue for concerts and the weekly fusion dance in town: Flow Fusion.

On any given Thursday night, colorful lights can be seen glowing in its arched windows and a powerful bassline can be heard reverberating through its walls. Stepping through the rust-red wooden door, you might notice the intricate sculpture of paper cranes hanging from the ceiling before setting your sights beyond the entryway and upon the reason you came here: the dancers whirling around the slick wooden dance floor. Striding forward to approach the dance floor, you’d notice on your left a DJ booth flanked by two smooth tree trunks and a mysterious, thin, black spiral staircase all extending up to a loft draped in enchanting green vines with heart-shaped leaves — what’s up there? We may never know — the staircase is blocked by an intriguing “Do Not Enter” sign, as if tempting inquisitive visitors to disobey it. The lights along the walls and on the small stage ahead at the end of the room glow with a gentle yet vivid light: pink, blue, purple or the newest color choice of the night.

While paying the entrance fee at the desk near the door, you might also see tired dancers resting on the plush chairs and couch in the lounge around the corner to the left; chatty dancers talking and laughing out on the patio through the doorway in the wall opposite you; more dancers sitting in the wooden benches lining the sides of the room, talking quietly, watching their friends dance and perhaps waiting for someone to approach and ask them to dance; and a dancer off in the corner doing some sort of solo interpretive dance (bouncing their ideas off one another like invisible flows of energy) or maybe just pretending to be penguins (in which case I may be among them). On the dance floor itself, you might see dancers with the energetic pulses of lindy hop; dancers with the whirling arms of salsa; dancers with the elastic tension of west coast swing; tango-y dancers leaning in with forward intent; blues-y dancers sitting back into their hips; dancers traveling all around the dance floor (likely fusing waltz and/or another similarly majestic style); dancers who appear to have morphed into a single, almost-imperceptibly-moving unit (so you can assume they’re doing micro fusion) — and if a dance ends up on the floor (and not by accident), then those must be contact improv dancers. In this atmosphere, most everyone seems intently focused on the music, the dance, the moment — and out of that emerges nothing short of magic.
A Way to Begin

As my fusion dance friend Daniel once noted, “fusion has been a great arena to practice one of life’s most important skills: being bad at stuff without being shamed for it,” which is a sentiment I’ve heard repeatedly from others and also experienced myself. “Being bad at stuff,” is a prerequisite to becoming good at it, and learning to transition between those states (aka general skill acquisition, or learning how to learn) is the ultimate meta-skill in life. In two slightly different interpretations of the statement, fusion for us is both a safer space to practice fundamentals of partner dancing as well as to practice allowing ourselves to be newbies. It allows us to learn, away from the judgmental eyes of the pretentious skill police, while also not joining their ranks ourselves.

All skills (as opposed to innate abilities) are something you have to learn; no one starts out good at them, even if it seems that way because they progress quickly beyond their initial state. Nevertheless, being bad at something never feels great (although we can be somewhat distracted from that feeling by curiosity, fun and other factors). In fact, the discomfort of inexperience often invokes a fight-or-flight response in me, but I’m learning to sit with it, to take a look around and to realize that it’s not as insufferably horrible as I perhaps thought.

That being said, no matter how much we wish otherwise, none of us have infinite resources to pursue every skill; so we do have to choose which skills to focus on learning and which ones we are content to appreciate vicariously. Partner dance has been the first skill I’ve sustainably acquired in my adulthood simply because I wanted to. In the meantime, I’ve also dabbled with other skills, but none engulfed me like this. From the first encounter, I’ve had a deep sense of knowing that I belong in the fusion dance community and a seemingly insatiable desire to dive as deep as I can into it. I wanted to learn everything immediately, and I noticed that I started placing expectations on myself: I expected my skills and experiences to remain on an upward trajectory at all times — which was clearly not realistic — and, when I inevitably failed to meet those expectations at times, I became disappointed.

At the time when I noticed this pattern, this is what I told myself:

“Although the best experiences often happen when you approach something without any expectations at all, that’s about as easy to do consistently as completely clearing your mind of all thoughts. Like observing your thoughts in meditation, what you can do instead is set your expectations in such a way that it gives you room to be surprised and simply observe, rather than entertain any other expectations that try to creep up. Whenever you’re starting something new, give yourself (at least) a year to just be a beginner, and after that you’ll start to better understand just how much more there is for you to learn.” ~ past Katie, 2 March 2022

Over the course of my first year of partner dancing, I embraced being a beginner as much as I could and ended up trying out more than ten partner dance styles across four countries to expand my dance background for fusion. I constantly put myself in situations where I had very little clue what I was doing, but I was (and still am) building up my belief in myself as someone who does difficult things, and partner dancing is full of reinforcement opportunities. Every time I visit a new dance venue, it yields a whole host of unpredictable factors to juggle: how people might interpret me based on how I
look, what the unspoken rules of the community might be, how well-ventilated it might be, etc. Every time I invite a stranger to dance, it opens me up to rejection or an unpleasant dance experience. These are uncertainties that I’ve faced often now, so they’ve become significantly less terrifying (and perhaps in some ways routine), but it doesn’t change that putting myself out there and interacting with new people is difficult. At the same time, I get to make memories dancing at a new venue and to explore a snippet of a connection with someone new. It’s an opportunity, not just an energy sink.

Now, almost two years later, I’ve certainly made progress, and I do see that there is a vast amount for me to learn, and I believe in my ability to learn a great deal of it, despite the barriers that I have to overcome in the process. I know what it feels like to push myself to expand my capabilities and maintain a mindsets of growth. It makes me excited for all of the adventures still yet to come — what a way to begin!
Learning to Dance with Shame

Since discovering fusion dance, I’ve been propelled forward by a seemingly insatiable desire to learn, yet often also held back by forces within myself that I am only just beginning to understand. Few feelings can take away my momentum more than shame. On the better occasions when it appears, it's a nagging voice in my head “you suck at this,” “you should be better,” “you’ll never be good enough,” “you should just stop trying and give up,” “they're better off without you,” etc. — and while thoughts like those hurt, I can push them away, but I can only do that for so long. On the worse occasions, shame has me curled up on my bed, being suffocated by a blanket of pain. I found myself in one such situation last week, and it was some of the most intense emotional pain I've experienced recently. With each shaky breath, I was hit by waves of emotion, swelling in my chest, pushing fractured gasps up out of my throat, roaring in my ears and pouring from my eyes.

Try as I might to resist it, the ever-present mark of shame has translated into me overthinking everything, fleeing from opportunities that I fear will expose me and my badness, assuming that I am always in the wrong and instinctually, chronically apologizing, even when people have directly told me it’s unnecessary. I remember early on other dancers telling me “oh you don’t need to apologize — we’re just practicing,” “no need to be sorry — we’re here to have fun” or “the only reasons to apologize in dance are if you injure someone or cross boundaries.” Their reassurance was very kind, but my sense of shame has continued to nag me that I’m still in the wrong. These days, since I’ve amassed more experience, I end up uttering fewer unnecessary apologies, but I’m still working on it, because they’re still there — though often now more implicit, e.g. “oops my brain turned off there,” “I didn’t fully decide what I was doing,” etc. I, like most people, often wish that shame would just go away — up and leave and never come back — but, of course, the more we try to run from it or ignore it, the more it begs for our attention.

Instead of trying to hide from shame or pretend it’s not there, what I’m suggesting instead is that we invite shame to dance. This surprises shame, who has (until now) never been directly addressed, much less asked for a dance. Shame suddenly becomes shy but agrees. You two make your way to the dance floor, the DJ starts a new song and the dance begins.

Shame has some difficulty staying on beat; they keep losing the time, getting embarrassed and apologizing. You know what that’s like, and you reassure them that it’s okay (even though you know that won’t necessarily make much of a difference — they need a lot of reassurance). Shame isn’t the nimblest dance partner — in fact, they move like they have a brick strapped to each foot, and you have to work a little harder to get them to move one way or another. But that’s not their fault; they’ve been weighed down by doubts for their whole existence. As a result, they have some idea about weight shifts already, even if they can still work on controlling them. Rather than the balanced stance you might use for sports, with the weight split evenly between your feet, you tend to dance with all of the weight on one foot or the other or in motion when actively transferring between the two. Shame is actually pretty good at this; when they’re on the left side, they’re leaning all the way to the left, and when they’re on the right side, they’re leaning all the way to the right — they don’t really have an in-between. Actually, shame leans over so far that you worry they might tumble over, so you
gently guide them to regain more balance. You can tell that they’re feeling unconfident overall; they’re afraid of making mistakes and are very much in fight-or-flight mode. You give them a couple of helpful tips and an extra helping of compassion, even making it as clear as you can verbally by telling them: “you’re not bad; you’re on your own journey of learning and I’m happy to play a role in it by dancing with you.”

At the end of the song, shame thanks you and looks visibly relieved that the dance is over. You wonder if they’ll be back next week (new dancer retention has been particularly low lately). Regardless, at least you tried — at least they tried.

Shame is back next week — but not to haunt you — they want to dance some more. They practiced at home over the weekend and want to show off their progress to you. You can tell that they worked on the things you told them; you’re proud of them, and you tell them as much.

They keep at it, week after week, and eventually, shame becomes much more coordinated and agile than before. They can hear the beat of the music and keep pace with it. They hold their head higher, make more eye contact and overall seem much more confident than before. They come up to you and thank you for listening to what they needed, for being patient and kind with them, for giving them a chance and helping them see and embody their potential. They were once wounded; they have healed; they are now stronger. Like them, I was wounded; I have been healing; I am getting stronger.

You see, when we learn to dance with our shame, we move toward healing ourselves; when we also learn to dance with others’ shame, we give them the option to work with their shame and move toward healing too. There are many advanced partner dancers who display their own technical strengths very well. They can pull off complicated moves with style and ease with other experienced dancers on the dance floor. They’ve worked hard to get where they are now. On the other hand, I’ve noticed that it’s a special kind of master dancer who's not afraid to wade into their own weaknesses and to meet others where they are with their own skill level, even much more inexperienced dancers, to explore how you both can enjoy the dance, given what’s available to work with in the moment.

The people who have been best at dancing with my shame bring a certain humanity and joy to the dance. How exactly they do that has varied. These dancers may sing and/or act silly — they show that they’re just there to have fun, not to judge me. These dancers may compliment specific things I do during the dance — they celebrate my strengths. If they do offer suggestions, e.g. in a class or practicum, they do it with kindness and patience — so that I experience it as learning from the more experienced dancer rather than receiving criticism from the superior one. These dancers generally accept what I’m able to offer and masterfully incorporate it into the dance — they say “yes and” with their actions, injecting their own creativity in a way that makes me feel intrigued and valued. With these dancers, even with mistakes (both mine and theirs), they flow with them — so that what starts as a mistake becomes part of the art — the masterpiece — that we’re crafting together. We are, after all, in this together — both of us and the shame that we dance with.
Masterpieces of Discovery

As we hit the last beat of the warm-up song, the crowd gathered on the bridge above us erupted into warm, raucous cheers. It now occurs to me that they probably thought we were a flash mob. Until that moment, I had no aspirations of participating in a flash mob in Vienna, Austria. As one does on a study abroad in Germany, I’d been learning Cuban salsa for a couple of months at this point and was now eagerly attending a drop-in lesson for it while visiting Vienna on my first international solo trip. On that day on the banks of the Danube River, I was being praised for something that I was pursuing specifically because it expanded my sense of self: salsa dancing. No one else was telling me to do it — in fact no one that I knew even knew that I was doing it. It hadn’t even occurred to me that it would get people clapping for us like it was a performance.

As a child, I disliked performing. I didn’t want to be the center of attention, deeply fearing the feeling of everyone’s eyes on me, along with their expectations and judgements. Yes, I played the flute in the school band for seven years (and the piccolo for two of them), but what started as an exploration of an interesting new skill eventually became another achievement to reassure my ego and a strange sense of obligation based on a sunk cost fallacy. The smile on my face was often painted on to mask my nervousness and insecurities. I wanted validation and appreciation, but I didn’t want to receive it because of a performance. At that time, I was already always performing — going through the motions every day to keep up the act of my character. I had boxed myself in as a character that consistently prioritized “productivity” over fun, rarely relaxed, assessed my personal value based on my achievements, held myself to the highest of standards, tried desperately (and often successfully) to be liked by authority figures and certainly did not dance. I was consistently praised for this performance that was stifling my ability to discern who I really was and what I really wanted. I always associated dance with performance, because if you yourself are not a dancer (yet), then that’s of course the part that you get to see out in the audience, whether you’re watching a stage or a screen.

So I didn’t think of myself as a dancer at all, especially not in high school. At some school dances, one might’ve seen a rare glimmer of life behind my thick mask as I displayed a set of socially acceptable dance moves before my classmates. At my prom, I sat and played Uno the whole time — which is not in itself a poor outcome — but as I sat and wondered what it’d be like to be out on the dance floor, it was for me the less fulfilling of the two options. On the other hand, I remember a particular guy in my grade who really let loose at school dances. Or perhaps “letting loose” isn’t the right phrase in this case, as it implies that he was tightly wound to begin with (as I was). No — his string was already generally loosely bound, just secure enough to tie his heart on his sleeve and trail out behind him, like the tail of a mischievous monkey, while he raced swivel chairs down the hallway. Regardless, at school dances his energy was released in copious amounts of boogying, bopping, wiggling, wagglng, shimmying, shaking, skipping, hopping, jumping and strutting all around the dance floor, laughing and smiling all the while. On-beat, off-beat — it made no difference because he was moving to the beat of his own drum. In my eyes, he gave concrete meaning to the phrase “dancing like no one was watching.” I watched him enviously from afar, sitting in my rigid plastic chair, hiding behind my mask. I wished I could move like he did; I wished I could let myself be as free as he was. And now I can.
Right after I got home on that first night showing up at a fusion dance on a whim, I texted a friend “I feel like I belong here. I feel so joyful… like it fulfilled a need that I didn’t know I had.” Partner dancing, particularly fusion dancing, has given me an outlet for self-expression that I didn’t realize I desperately needed. As I express myself through dance, I uncover the self that I ignored and repressed; I discover how to progressively bridge the gap between who I am now and who I desire to become. At fusion dances, I’ve become comfortable letting loose, and my generally high-strung thread is becoming more relaxed over time. I allow myself to be shamelessly silly, to initiate hi-fives mid-dance, make goofy noises and dance like a monkey. I move in ways that feel good for my body, and I don’t worry so much that others may be judging me, because the dancers that choose fusion are choosing to break the mold and combine different partner dances in non-traditional, creative ways. And if I do notice someone who I don’t know sitting and watching me, I like to imagine that they’re thinking about the joy and freedom I exude, like I did with that guy in high school years ago.

I am free not only to express the person I already know I am on the inside — but also to discover the possibilities for myself that I didn’t even realize existed. When I begin a dance, especially with someone I’ve never danced with before, I don’t know where it will go and neither does my partner. Especially in fusion, infinite dance moves and move combinations are possible, and I love continuously finding moments of serendipity when I get to “do things I don’t know how to do.” But how can I do something if I don’t know how to do it? By this seemingly paradoxical statement, I mean that I enjoy the surprise of movements that I couldn’t replicate even if I tried because I’m not consciously aware of how to do them (or even that it’s an option to do them) until my dance partner’s movements, the music and my own body and mind align just so — and only at that moment does the path forward become clear to me and the movement just flows. All of this happens before I can even realize it, and by the time that I try to reflect on it afterward, the path has often already become hazy once again. It seems the haze only lifts with the magic of the moment, perhaps inviting the skittish subconscious to come forward and contribute a suggestion to the art, before it once again hides out of sight from others’ awareness and even our own. However, by treading this path repeatedly, I eventually clear the haze for good, and what was once a mystery to me becomes clearly understood. I feel lucky to be able to tap into these glimpses of wisdom from beyond my conscious understanding, to explore other dancers’ own subconscious suggestions and to share the moments of elated perplexity and wonder that we discover when we wander and tread closer to our most authentic selves — guided by open curiosity, rather than the fear and doubt that so often clouds our vision.

When people find ways to express themselves authentically, the art that they create together nestles into a special place in their hearts. It’s not a performance: it’s a genuine masterpiece of discovery, and the smile that it brings to my face is equally real.

Now, I still don’t particularly like putting on performances for others, but I do love discovering hidden truths for myself.
Meditations on Dance

Like in a body scan meditation, as I relax into a dance, I become vividly aware of my every movement, from a leap across the floor to a flick of my fingers. Sometimes, moving an inch can feel like a grand gesture when I’m solidly grounded in the present moment. Simultaneously, when deep in a flow state, I move seemingly without conscious thought; it’s as if the music itself moves my body — or perhaps we are one and the same.

With my dance partner’s hand in mine, I move them both away from my partner, shifting their weight toward their toes to suggest forward movement; I raise our arms up as if opening a gate, creating space for my partner to pass underneath in a turn. Adding a partner (or more than one) simply adds more facets of the experience to my realm of focus. My bubble of awareness expands slightly, and, in a way, their body becomes an extension of my own.

Over time, I’ve begun to understand that I can incorporate anything I experience into my own dances, be it solo or partnered, at least for my own enrichment. For example, I can involve more of my senses: I involve my sense of sight by shifting my gaze with the beat, like a camera switching its subject; by incorporating my field of view into the dance, I creatively control my awareness of my surroundings. I also enjoy making my dancing a tactile experience for myself (even while solo dancing) — I touch my fingers together, run them along my arms and feel the objects in my vicinity: the smooth wall, the grainy wooden door frame, the fluffy carpet.

I’ve also started incorporating what are essentially breathing exercises into my dancing. I’d learned that movements to the beat no longer had to be strictly focused on the external — they could also be partially focused on the internal: I can breathe in or out for two counts or four or eight in a gentle, steady stream of air that lends stillness to the dance or forceful staccato breaths that emphasize the rhythm. Those types of movements mainly enrich my own experience of the dance, but they can also be extended to others under the right circumstances. By controlling my breath and bringing attention to it, I can use it as another way to communicate with my dance partner — who, if tuned-in to it enough, will often sync their breathing with mine, or vice versa. (I’ve even heard of people sharing dances that consist of only controlled breath, although I myself haven’t experienced one yet.)

All of these factors bring about a strong sense of grounding when I dance. I normally spend so much time in my worries about the past and the future: what happened and might happen, what I should’ve done and should do, what I’m running from and what I ought to chase after, what hurt me before and what might hurt me again. I wish I could simply stop those thoughts, but I can’t direct my attention away from them and into nothingness — it needs a new home. I’ve been learning that that new home can be what’s been right in front of me all along: my existence in the here and now. Dance allows me to feel more at home in my body than I ever have before. It is a temporary refuge from the hectic stressors of life; it gives me an opportunity to be nowhere but here in the present and inspires in me a deep gratitude for it. It continually baffles me in the most delightful way that these moments of deep immersion in dance are part of my reality and that I get to keep experiencing them again and again, every time in a novel form.
Communication, Connection and Community

Before I even thought about learning to dance, I loved foreign languages; I’ve always loved learning new patterns of communication that I could use to shift my perspective, expand my experience of the world and connect with other people.

Partner dance is, in a way, its own language — communicated via connection. My frame feels how my partner’s frame bends, how their weight shifts from one foot to the other and then forward, tells me that they’re about to take a step right before they actually do. Tension here pulls me in; compression there propels me away. One of us offers up an outstretched hand, inviting the other to initiate a point of connection. Signals like these are the building blocks of communication in a dance, especially fusion, when my dance background (my dance languages) will likely not be the exact same as my partner’s.

I’ve danced with people whose spoken language I couldn’t understand; I’ve danced with people who, for reasons unrelated to language, I’ll never be able to understand; I’ve danced with people who I’ve immediately, intuitively understood and I’ve danced with people who seemed to understand me, even just a small part of me, better than I understood myself. Sometimes our communication on the dance floor is consistent with our patterns of communication off of it — and sometimes it ends up perplexingly at odds with it. Regardless, every dance with a new person shows me a part of their character that I might not get to see otherwise — oftentimes, it’s a part that’s freer and more joyful, normally hidden under the armor that we sport to get through the battles of everyday life in this world we live in.

A strange freedom also comes from knowing that we’re only sharing the experience of this dance for three or four minutes, which can pass in the blink of an eye or feel like a small eternity. We might dance another song or two, directly following this one or perhaps later in the event, when we notice each other scanning the room for the next person to invite for a dance, but there’s no certainty of it. It’s just a dance, beautiful though it may be, with no expectation that it needs to be anything more. Some dances do turn into long conversations off the dance floor, time spent together before or after events, connections that extend into other parts of our lives. Others don’t. But there’s a certain beauty to the end of a particularly connected dance, when we thank each other for the experience and go our separate ways to find the next one. I notice that the most wonderful dances often leave me feeling like I’m floating, having melted away all the worries that were weighing me down before — that’s the magic of connection: it catches us, builds us up and sends us on our merry way, better equipped to deal with whatever the future holds.

I’m finding that connection is not the scarce resource I once strictly believed it was. When I believed it to be scarce, I tended to focus on the end of a connection more than our shared experience of it in the present, and I habitually tried to impose my expectations over reality, to force too many things or things that aren’t right for us. When connection is no longer scarce, I no longer feel so prone to fall into these unhealthy habits, and, thankfully, it doesn’t make the individual connections mean any less. After all, every connection is in its own way valuable and meaningful to me — the way that I
dance with my salsa-based fusion friends is different from the way that I dance with my micro-fusion-based friends, my tango-based friends, my contact-improv-based friends, my fusion-first friends and so on. An abundance of connection encourages me to invite each of them in and also allow them to come and go, to ebb and flow, like waves lapping at the shore.

When I have an abundance mindset, I start to notice when connections aren’t fostering my growth, when they only exist because I’ve obscured, diminished, twisted and malformed myself to fit what I believed was the version of myself that other people wanted to see. I can then figure out how to start righting those wrongs I’ve committed against myself. Figuring out how to embody my true form in my bonds with others is at times confusing, at times frustrating and almost always scary, but it’s clear to me that it’s worth the struggle in the end.

After all, I only want to dance with people who actually want to dance with me — why should I navigate the other aspects of my social life any differently? Attracting such people into my life requires that I communicate openly about who I am, what I want and what I can offer others. When I acknowledge my unmet social needs and (instead of trying to squash them and make myself conform) actually look for people who celebrate me for me and who find meeting my needs to be as natural a consequence of our interactions as breathing air — that is how I develop mutually-beneficial relationships, find my people (in this case my beloved fusion folks) and build my community. This is of course easier said than done, especially when I feel overwhelmed by the fear that no one could ever appreciate all parts of who I am, but I’m making steady progress, unfolding into a perfectly imperfect person I’m proud to be.

As I continue to dance, I keep seeking communication, connection and community, and in doing so, everything starts to click into place, and my world becomes just a little brighter and more alive.
Micro Fusion by Candlelight

The tucked-away studio is a microcosm of coziness. Candles... Candles everywhere... An elongated mirror hangs on the rightmost wall above a tub of water with lit candles floating in it, lining the thick tub rim, resting on the neighboring ledges. They emit a soft orange glow that fills the otherwise dark room. A few of the candles have already burned down by this time. The music — a solid blanket of sound that instantly soothes my nervous system — bobs and weaves with the flickering of the rest of them. The sign by the door reads “By Candlelight: during this set, this room will be lit only by candlelight, and over the course of the hour, the candles will slowly burn out one-by-one and the atmosphere will become increasingly intimate.”

Couples (and maybe a throuple or two) pulse and sway, smiles of contentment visible on all of their faces, many of them with their eyes closed. By keeping the dances physically tiny, they don’t have to worry so much about traveling around the dance floor or running into one another. Despite their close proximity in this packed space, each of them is immersed in their own little dance, their own little world.

I see you standing at the dance floor’s edge, watching them in awe. They could be us... I want to be them. I slip through the doorway, shutting the door softly behind me, and join you. You invite me to dance before I can ask you — I’m glad we think alike. You grasp my hand with a gentle, reassuring firmness, and we find an unoccupied place on the crowded dance floor, a little space to call home.

This home has bare walls full of potential, a perfect canvas for co-creating art. We begin in a variation of close embrace, with my arm around your shoulder and onto your back, your hand supporting my shoulder blade and our free hands gently clasped. More contact means more connection and communication and more vivid art, and I have a wonderful feeling about the pieces we’re about to create. What starts as a gentle pulse with the whole body then splits into a smattering of isolations in the arms, shoulders, torso, hips, legs — some extending over the full range of motion in this position and others barely perceptible. Then, our movements regroup in broad, continuous strokes back and forth. One move after another, flowing like watercolors. The spontaneous patterns are magnificently communicated — tension, compression, flow.

The song comes to a close (all too quickly), and I find myself wishing it didn’t. You pause for a moment — listening, feeling, waiting — I can tell you wish the same. “Do you want to dance another one?” Without hesitation: “yes.”

Another one becomes another and another — another movement, another song... behind layers of emotion another me, another you, another reality where only the two of us exist.

Candles flicker out, and still we dance on.

You have this isolated ball of energy in your body where we connect, and I can detect its path and add my own energy to redirect its course. Together, we keep the energy flowing seamlessly.
With a spirit of ambidancetrous experimentation (both roles, instead of both hands), we take turns leading and following, sometimes accidentally. Here, you can lead something. No...you — a gentle deflection. Wait, who’s leading now? Wait, where did that movement come from? Was it from you or me? Is it possible that it came from both of us simultaneously, generated beyond our consciousness? Does it really matter? Roles melt away into co-created movement.

More candles flicker out, and still we dance on.

I have no idea how long we’ve been dancing for now, but it feels like forever — the wonderful kind of forever that stretches out a moment of joy to become your whole existence. In a way, this joy and connection can be one of our reasons for being, anyway.

At this point, we move as a connected whole, a new being (perhaps a beast but benevolent) with four arms, four legs, and two heads but one heart — a heart that beats, beats, beats. I gently sway my arm to the beat and feel how the movement ripples through our bodies. My arm moves your arm, your shoulder, your torso, your hips, your legs. My arm is your arm. Your arm is my arm. Our arm sways — sways us.

More candles flicker out, and still we dance on.

“Last song!” calls out the DJ, and the crowd and I sigh with a mixture of bliss and disappointment that the bliss is coming to an end. The room has at this point become quite dim, as many candles have already met their ends, and those that remain don’t have much more time left. Neither do we.

These last four minutes are a deafening blur of emotion — explosive, unapologetic joy; calming, healing comfort for my inner child; psychological tears for the past me under pandemic quarantine who so strongly yearned for moments of connection like this.

The last beats of the song fade away into stillness and there’s a brief pause as everyone savors the last moment in their dance partner’s arms, silhouetted in the soft, dim glow of the few remaining candles. Then, the room erupts with clapping and cheering. The warm glow of the candles is far surpassed by the warm glow of the collective joy emanating from our hands, lips and hearts.

With oxytocin levels maximized, it is time to emerge back into the light. As we slowly exit the room, you say, “I kinda feel like I’m drunk,” and with a grin and a chuckle I reply, “who needs alcohol when you have micro fusion?”

And still we dance on… Long after we’ve parted ways, our souls dance on — swaying, pulsing, listening, responding, laughing, trying, failing, flailing, learning, growing, living, thriving.