



Kelly Casanova

West Coast Swing!

Progressing Step by Step

At a certain stage in developing dance skills, many dancers feel that they are “getting worse” rather than improving. What is actually happening is that the dancers’ understanding of the dance has increased to the point to where he or she has become more critically aware of mistakes they were making all along. The following paragraphs chronicle my attempts to become a “good” dancer with my “older but wiser” editorial comments in parenthesis. Hopefully dancers struggling with their own progress will take comfort by reading about my efforts.

When I first started taking West Coast Swing lessons I thought that after about two months I was “really getting good” because I “knew” all the basic steps. (Ignorance is bliss, isn’t it?) Then about six months later I really thought I was getting even better because I “knew” all these fancy variations: inside whip, side pass with a tuck and turn, whip with behind the back hand change, etc...(Be nice now, you know you are starting to recognize yourself!) So then I thought, “If I could just learn to spin, well that would make me a great dancer!” (Some people are slower than others...) So I practiced spinning, and eventually I learned to spin. But then I decided that that perhaps I needed to acquire some additional skills. (Ah-ha! Maybe there was hope for me after all!) I had just discovered syncopations. At this point I decided that syncopations, not patterns, would make me a “good” dancer. (I take it back, there wasn't any hope...) And that being the case, I actually didn’t know much at all about West Coat Swing. (Surprise!) So I spent the next year acquiring more and more footwork, but still I didn’t feel complete. (Du-uh!) Then, when I wasn’t sure where to go next for improvement, I was offered a teaching position. “Oh, so learning both the lead and follow and teaching will make me a better dancer”. (Couldn't hurt!) So I took the job and figured I had finally reached “good” dancer status because I now “knew” both parts and was a teacher. (Wrong!) But once again reality hit, and I realized I didn’t feel like a really “good” dancer. So then I figured if I competed and won a local Jack & Jill contest then I’d really be a “good” dancer. (I take it back, there was no hope for me after all...) So after chasing a trophy and finally winning one I was elated...for about ten minutes. I had achieved my goal, I was “good”, except I didn’t feel all that good. (At last a ray of light at the end of the tunnel!) So why didn’t I feel good? Well, I decided I needed to win a bigger dance contest - maybe one in which I even did a routine with lifts and aerals and could perform on TV. (That ray of light at the end of the tunnel was on oncoming freight train...)

While continuing to compete at a national level (and on TV and with lifts and aerals...), I discovered body isolations. (Have pity!) So that’s what makes a good dancer, I thought. Ok, I’ll learn body isolations, and then I’ll be a good dancer. (Does anyone see a pattern here?) So then after deciding that body movement was where it was all at I spent another year just learning to do a ripple. (Yeah, so I’m really slow...) A year or so later I discovered something called “the music”. (Ok, I’m really, REALLY slow.) Now I decided that hitting the breaks and dancing with a “feel” for the music was what would make me a “good” dancer. (Well, at least I was getting warmer!) So once again I felt like a beginner and realized that I really didn’t know much at all. (Finally, some true enlightenment!) I felt I had really missed the boat on the dance all these year, but, “Oh well, might as well get started on listening to the music today so I can someday be a decent dancer”. (Notice my goals becoming slightly more humble?) So I worked on understanding and “feeling” the music.

At about this time I realized that in spite of all the “stuff” that I “knew” I wasn’t dancing half as well as I thought; I saw myself on video. (Good thing there are 24 hour crisis lines!) I was demoralized. I didn’t really “know” anything at all! How could I ever hope to show my face at a dance again with all my many flaws? What business did I have calling myself a dancer, let alone an instructor? After wallowing in self-pity for a few days I decided to go back to square one and work on my basic technique. (Well, that’s a good place to start.) I realized that there was more than one way to do a basic whip. (Go ahead, laugh all you want-you know you see yourself in here somewhere!) Then about a year or so later I discovered my partner – you know the person you hold hands with while you are showing the world all your “stuff” and expressing your inner soul to the music. Anyway, now I decided that actually connecting with a partner was what might make me a tolerable dancer. And then a year later I decided learning other swing dances would help my dancing improve, and then after that it was learning to judge would help my dancing improve, and then a couple years later it was hosting a three day competition, and so on and so on.

My process of self improvement so far has taken me over 25 years, and continues to be a work in progress. The point of all of this is that the more I learn about the dance the more I realize I don’t know all that much and that there is a lot more for me to work on and learn. So what do I think makes a “good” dancer now? Everything. Technique, timing, connection, musical interpretation, creativity, rhythm, patterns, syncopations, intelligent choreography, body isolations, balance, control, comic timing, social and competitive skills, charisma, emotional projection, having fun (Remember that?), attitude, confidence, self esteem and all the other qualities I haven’t discovered just yet. These are the qualities that I think make a “good” dancer. What makes a great dancer? All that plus soul. So, now I’m also working on my soul! The process for me so far has been both incredibly exhilarating as well as humbling. I’m humbled all the time by the talent around me, and sometime I think I’ll never feel as confident and as “good” as I felt after four weeks of beginning classes. But that’s OK. It’s OK because I know that, in reality, I’m a better dancer today than I was yesterday. And, if I keep working at it, I just might be a better dancer tomorrow than I am today.

So for all those of you who might be feeling discouraged because you think you are getting worse. Take heart! You are just awakening to a new level of awareness that opens doors to more learning opportunities. One thing that I wish I would have known at the beginning is that as satisfying as it is to reach a goal, the process of reaching the goal can be fun and satisfying in itself. So I am now learning to enjoy learning. I am now happy rather than discouraged to discover what I don’t yet know about the dance. The opportunity to acquire more knowledge and more skills motivates me. With all the talent in our community I’m positive I will never lack for sources of inspiration.