

Folkdancing: an Antidote to Sameness
by Bernice Maslan

I recently read a dystopia/utopia book from the 90's entitled The Giver, which I found thought-provoking. The community had evolved to sameness and predictability in order to minimize unpleasantness and nasty surprises. This had been true for so many generations that much had been forgotten by the average person. Life was certainly easier for them in some ways, but what trade-offs! They had even eliminated the perception of color, and there was no music or dancing. Clearly, this world is not for everyone.

One of the things I treasure about folkdancing, folkdance music, and folkdance costumes is the incredible variety--the non-sameness.

Dancewise, we have differences in form, whether couple, individual, circle, line, longways set, set for a particular number of couples, square dances, round dances. We have differences in the direction of movement, hand hold, shoulder hold, arm positions, even which arm goes on top in a basket hold. There is variety in rhythm, steps, patterns, tempo, repetition. Sometimes the styling is different for men and women, and often in couple dances the follow's steps are different than the lead's. Some dances are done in a circle with no obvious leader. Conversely, for line dances, the role of the leader is a fun and important one. Interestingly enough, for contradance and English dance, the leader isn't even dancing!

Differences in styling abound across cultures and sometimes in the same culture over time. Couple dances exhibit tremendous variety in many ways, which even include the extent of eye contact between partners and the extent of physical contact. There are differences in dance positions and types of movements. Think of tango versus a stately English country dance or Polish couple dance.

Even the degree to which improvisation within a genre is viewed as a flourish or aberration varies. Improvisation when proper adds extra color and allows for differences and individuality among people dancing the very same dance, letting the experienced exuberant dancer dance hand in hand with those wishing to dance the basic. When my son Raffi first had the basics of Balkan dancing down, it was the excitement conveyed by the leaders' improvisation that kept him wanting to learn more. This sparked his lifelong love of dance in all forms.

I have often been fascinated by typical or national dances of various countries. Why do some country's dances feature the men slapping their legs, some involve complicated maneuvers where you virtually tie yourself into a knot, some involve the use of sticks, some include a very basic step done in a circle or line for a long time that can become almost trancelike, some include the women turning and turning. Some country's dances include lots of hip movement such as Latin American dances. Some keep the shoulders locked in and arms by the sides, like some Turkish dances and Irish dance.

Especially as we cross cultures, there is a variety in rhythms and music. Some dances are in 4/4 time, some in 5 like Pentozali. Some have interesting varied rhythms like Jove Male Mome, which includes 7/8 and 11/8. I was taught a rhythm pattern for that one as follows: slow, slower, quick, quick, slow, slower. Contrast that to a hambo, for instance. Differences in emphasis even with the same time signature change how the dances fit the music and how they are done. Some Macedonian dances are very syncopated, while most French dances step right on the beat. Zweifachers step right on the beat, even when switching between the waltz and the pivot.

We even have differing tempos, sometimes within the same dance as in Bavno Oro. The same genre of dance can be enjoyable at various tempos. For example, in the days of dancing to records, I used to love dancing to a particular very fast singing hambo. Different instrumentation from different countries can add a tremendous array of diversity. From gaida to nyckelharpa, bodhran to poyk, doing a silent kolo with no music to dancing accompanied by a full orchestra, we have such a huge and varied palette to choose from and enjoy.

Add the colorful variety of costumes to the mix and what a world we have to explore! In the realm of traditional folkdance, costumes run the gamut from black and white Transylvanian costumes to brilliantly colored Indian saris, intricate embroidery of Polish costumes to the elaborate beadwork of African dress. The range includes everything from lederhosen to kilts, from the full circle Jalisco skirts of Mexico to straight Argentine tango skirts with their high slits. There is variety and variability from head to toe: from fez and sombrero all the way to bare feet and tall boots.

Therefore, I state with confidence folkdancing is a strong antidote to sameness and predictability.

Challenge sameness and predictability in our own lives. Let's break out of our comfort zones and try something new!