

Music and Followers

Music can really lure and drive us into dancing, whatever the style. I had occasion recently to hear music so compelling that I immediately wanted to be in a line of people dancing. A fabulous klezmer band Shpilkis was playing at a winter solstice party. Much Yiddish dance to klezmer music is done in lines or circles and that's what I wanted to do. I was able to get a line going a couple of times which was a lot of fun, but other times all the other dancers were engaged in free rock-style dancing.

I appreciate folkdancers. When the music starts for a line dance, many of us either start to lead if we are confident or look around for a leader to follow. This comes so naturally to us that it feels odd to be around lively driving music where none of the dancers join hands and begin to dance together. I know that not everyone reacts this way, however good the music.

Sunday summer afternoons in Montreal, many people flock to a big drum circle with wonderful rhythms and lots of good energy. When I'm there I always want to take people's hands and get a line moving, but generally people look at me funny and it hasn't worked so far. I've been unable to get that first or second follower who would start the trend with me, so it has gone nowhere.

This got me remembering the second follower theory. Derek Silvers in a TED talk uses the example of a dancing guy at the Sasquatch music festival in 2009. One shirtless fellow stands up and starts dancing. His movements are easy to follow. After a while, a second guy joins him and in so doing turns a single nut into a leader. It is only when a third person starts doing it too that it becomes the thing to do, and people hurry to join. A leader needs the guts to stand alone and look ridiculous. It also takes guts to be the first follower, but it is the second follower who is the turning point. The leader must nurture the first few followers as equals. Be visible, be easy to follow. Movement must be public. Everyone needs to see the followers because followers emulate other followers, not the leader. Courageously follow. Being the first or second follower is an underappreciated form of leadership.

Silvers extrapolates from this pattern of joining dancing to how all movements begin. Leadership is over-glorified. It's the first follower that turns it into a movement. The best way to make a movement, if you really care, is to courageously follow and show others how to follow. When you find a lone nut doing something great, have the guts to be the first person to stand up and join in.

We know that in a line dance, the first person is the leader. Sometimes and especially in some dances, leaders do so many flourishes and variations that someone striving to learn the dance would be well to watch the second in line. Some variations also involve the second person, like when the first two make an arch and go back over the line. Therefore, it can be the second follower or the person third in line who is really the person to follow.

Music makes dancing happen. Dancing together as a community takes more. It requires cooperation. In a crowd of individuals dancing alone, it takes more than guts to inspire group connection. You need people who like what they see and want to take part even if it is outside their comfort zone.

Find something you believe in. Go forth and follow!