

When 1 + 1 = 1

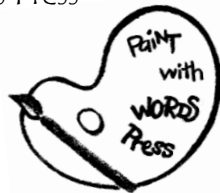
That "Impossible" Connection

EXCERPTS

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Introduction: Why connection?¹

Connection. This theme of connection is something that has been with me all my life. I was six years old when we left the then Soviet Republic of Moldova for a distant place, to build a new life. I still remember the image of my cousin Mărioara chasing the train on the platform as we pulled away. On our way out of Chişinău, we passed by the hill behind the apartment where I spent the first six years of my life, and that is the first image I remember bringing me to tears when I returned to visit for the first time 14 years later. I remember wishing that my family was closer – yearning for a big family gathering. Immigration spread my mother's family across Europe and my father's family to Israel and Australia. We ended up in Seattle, on yet another continent. Large family gatherings are few and far between.

There have also been some relationships and non-relationships, connections and disconnections, romantically – the tug between career and love and the wanderings of a traveling soul. I've begun adopting cousins and brothers, sisters and aunts in distant places – connecting with people across oceans and time zones. Despite the geographic complications and even if we don't talk often, when we do finally get together or exchange a few messages, it's as if we saw each other yesterday. This stretching of ties to people is perhaps a reflection of the diaspora within me.

Tango has helped me connect with and understand myself in ways that in this society of staunch individualism, I had found hard to do. Of course in tango there are egos

¹ Inspired by a question from Paul Stieger of Boise, Idaho, USA in October 2012: "I'm most curious to ask, has the connection theme of your book been something growing inside you your whole life? Did the connection drive kick into an even higher gear when you began Tango in 2009?"

and hard-held opinions and divisions – all the traits you will find in most groups where people are passionate about what they do – but there is also an amazing feeling of community, of coexistence that is so palpable, of cooperation and interaction and respect between people that span generations. Through tango I've found a sense of belonging that I have struggled with, that many of us struggle with.

And, although tango is very special to me, it's not unique. It's not unique in the fact that it gives people an excuse to gather. Many activities do that and many more used to be prevalent in our society. Nowadays, when we sit in boxes at a desk, each staring at our own shiny little box, counting the minutes until we each climb into wheeled boxes all facing in one direction to reach our bigger boxes and lock the door behind us, how often do we really stop to touch, take a minute to listen to another person's heart, pause enough to acknowledge another person's story? When our stimuli are overwhelmingly visual and verbal and truth is concrete and quantified, how often do we recognize our troubles reflected in another's anguish? How often do we feel and trust our intuition?

We are empathetic by nature. I've been hearing of more and more studies that confirm this. For hundreds of years, we have been separated and divided. Man is self-serving and self-interested. His selfishness will lead your neighbor to steal from you, Hobbes told us. Survival of the fittest. But his empathy for another human being will also prompt your neighbor to get his saw when a tree falls on your house (as my friend Karl told me recently), empathy will tug at his heart when he sees an animal mistreated, and empathy is what will bring someone who has just enough money to buy food through the end of the week to still find a quarter to share with someone in need.

It's especially in the difficult times, in the vulnerable times that we can see the strength of our bonds with those around us – the connection – more clearly. When we lose a loved one, when we take a risk, when we dive into a dream without knowing where we're going – those are the moments when people stretch out a hand for us to hold, offer a warm welcome, join together to give us a push along our path. It's when we have the opportunity to help someone that we connect more deeply with our own humanity.

Tango has been an adventure as much outward as it has been inward. A journey to find myself, an excavation of the nerves and the emotions I had begun to trim and cut away – to numb myself to heartache, to shield myself from vulnerability, to protect myself from the unknown. Tango has seen me through some stunningly beautiful moments and some deeply painful moments – through loss and growth and adversity – through emotions that span the breadth of the gamut: from elation, uncontrolled, overwhelming joy to the sad, silent emptiness that's left when nothing else is. Tango has helped me see myself from the inside, out.

Can we separate the journey from the catalyst, from the propellers, from the person? I don't think so. It's all connected. It's all one package. We are all much more than black and white – we are many, many shades of gray. Tango has helped me understand that Life is About the Connection – with those around us and consequently, with ourselves.

From *When 1+1=1: That "Impossible" Connection* by Gabriela Condrea

Tango is About the Connection

el abrazo²

I press my hand
against the line
of his back
pulling him closer
yet pushing him away
keeping him at a distance
creating the tension
the connection
defining the parameters
between two
who walk as one.

² *el abrazo* – an embrace, a hug

Bailar las Caídas³ – Dance the Wobbles

En el tango no tenemos problemas de equilibrio
justo porque somos flexibles
como el junco enfrentándose al viento fuerte.
Bailamos las caídas, así nunca caemos.
No hay culpa si hay colaboración.
La rigidez contra el mundo,
contra nuestro compañero no sirve.
No nos peleamos con la realidad;
la bailamos.
Porque la idea es seguir juntos,
caminar y estar juntos,
manteniendo el abrazo de dos que forman uno.
Buscamos tierra, echamos raíces,
nos abrazamos y caminamos.

In tango, balance isn't an issue
precisely because we are flexible,
like reeds facing the strong winds of a storm.
We dance the wobbles, that way we never fall.
There is no blame in collaboration,
there's no sense in being rigid against our partner.
We don't fight our reality –
we dance it.
Because the objective is to continue together,
to walk and to be together,
maintaining our embrace of two who form one.
We seek the earth beneath our feet, set roots,
we embrace and walk.

³ There is actually a move in tango called *la caída*, “the fall”; rather than fighting the momentum, you use it to produce another movement.

It feels better to kiss someone when they kiss you back

Since giving involves making yourself vulnerable, it feels better to give when your partner does so, too, or at least when they're open to receiving what you're giving.

"Each force is answered by an equal and opposite reaction," explained my high school physics teacher, "Try this over spring break: kiss someone and see if they kiss you back." He was laughing so hard that he could hardly get the words out, but he was right: it's nice to kiss someone when they return your kiss with proportionate force. If the force is very disproportionate – they pull away or smother you – things can become a little uncomfortable.

It feels nice if someone accepts when you offer the most important thing you have to offer: yourself. It feels better to kiss someone when they kiss you back.

Make Space for Yourself

When it comes to our own individual space, we have all probably had the sensation that things might be easier in this dance if we took up less space – the *giros*, the *ochos*,⁴ we could maneuver. The fact is that many, many of us do take up too much space, and it has nothing to do with that extra *medialuna* you grabbed for breakfast at La Viruta⁵ last night or the fact that some of us have larger hips than others. Many of us take up more space than our natural body make-up would require due to our poor posture.

Who hasn't heard a teacher say, don't look at your feet! Keep your head up! And we obediently lift our heads for just a minute before sinking into the same inclination to look at what marvelous things are happening with our feet. But one day, I heard Olga Besio say, "If you look down, you're taking someone else's space." How obvious! If my head is not aligned on top of my spine and I'm hunched over, I am taking someone else's space: my partner's.

Mariana Dragone says, our hips stick out and head moves forward because we don't make room for them in the vertical alignment of our spinal column. If I stretch my heels toward the floor and the top of my head toward the ceiling, lengthening my spinal column from top to bottom (from my tailbone to the top of my head), my hips and neck and everything else all of a sudden have space to arrange themselves comfortably. Try it. Even if you're sitting, you can stretch just your spine. You'll notice right away that your posture improves.

⁴ *giros* – turns; *ochos* – spiral movements that look like a figure 8

⁵ A tango club/milonga in Buenos Aires where they serve *medialunas* (half moon-shaped pastries) for breakfast at 4:30am on the weekends.

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Al poner el carrito en marcha, los melones se acomodan solos – you don't have to worry about arranging the melons, because once you get the cart moving, they arrange themselves. This saying reminds me of an email chain I received about the golf balls, sand, and coffee in a jar analogy. Basically, there's always space to fit in the small stuff once you get the important things in order. If you put the sand in first, there isn't room for the golf balls. If I focus on my priorities – health, family, friends, career, etc. – the details will fall into place. When I don't lengthen my spinal column, that's when things get pushed out of the way and have to find space for themselves. When I do lengthen my spine and make room for all of me, everything has space to align. I can actually get in the way of someone getting closer to me; I can get in the way of my own dreams. In making room for myself, I in turn, make room for my partner.

Moving to his beat

Arms around his neck, his hands on my hips, swaying from side to side.⁶ The beat was definitely not the same in his ears as in mine.

And at some point, I decided that if he was a little off the beat I heard, it didn't really matter that much to me. If I could move to his beat, if I could breathe with him and blend with him, being with him was more important than fighting the battle of who was right and who was wrong or forcing ourselves to march to anyone else's beat. Sometimes we get so caught up in the way things "should" be, the patterns of society, our plans, what others think, that we lose sight of the beauty of the way things are. We forget the importance of really listening to one another and start talking at each other. The beat = what "should" be, and the feeling of our bodies swaying from side to side = what is.

And if I don't respect the person I'm dancing with enough to put the music and the beat second to his and our needs, why am I dancing with him, anyway? Sometimes the only thing that matters is that you feel where your partner is and let him know where you are. Move as one and you can find a way to work from there, embracing the reality of what you both bring to the table.

So when I catch myself confusing my priorities and anxious about respecting the beat, I remind myself that if I'm not connected with my partner, I'm dancing alone, to my beat or someone else's, but dancing alone.

I wrap my arms around him just a little tighter and breathe out so I can synchronize with him. I start matching the undulations of his body, and we dance to the rhythm of our souls.

⁶ This wasn't tango, but having worked so much on connecting with my partner gave me a different perspective.

Dance like Water

“Mistakes” are just unanticipated opportunities

When I confessed to a friend that I need to stop making the wrong choices in love, I expected her to answer something along the lines of, yes, grow up. But instead she replied, not every relationship has to be a lifelong union and if such is not the case, it doesn't mean it was a poor decision. Some things are meant to last for longer periods of time than others. Just because something doesn't last the happily-ever-after it supposedly should, doesn't mean that it wasn't what I needed at the time.

There are no wrong choices. We make choices based on what we feel or need. It's unfair to judge our decisions later on as wrong because we obviously chose them for a specific reason which at that particular moment and in that context made sense. We're used to right and wrong, black and white, but life isn't always so simple. All we can give is the best we've got and that's the most anyone can really ask of us. Tango is an imperfect union between two perfectly imperfect people.

The concept of “mistakes” implies that there is a way things should be that is different from the way they are. If you shift your focus from what “should be” to what is, you can meet each dance partner where they're at. Then you can start connecting with the person you are dancing with, instead of being anxious about the ideal you were taught. You can start connecting with yourself and figuring out what works for you and building on that, rather than

From *When 1+1=1: That "Impossible" Connection* by Gabriela Condea

fixating on what doesn't. There are no mistakes – only opportunities to explore movements other than what you had intended, to adapt to your partner and listen to each other and create together. And that's what it's all about.

Pintar sin Límites – Paint Outside the Lines

¿Qué es lo malo de pintar sin límites,
sin saber el tamaño del cuadro,
sin saber que herramientas vas a necesitar,
de irse sin planes,
de pintar fuera de las líneas?
Creatividad nace del no saber,
inteligencia de la necesidad.
¿Qué es lo malo de perderse
si es para encontrarse otra vez?

What's so bad about painting without limits,
without knowing the size of the picture,
without knowing what tools you'll need?
What's so bad about leaving without a plan,
about painting outside the lines?
Intelligence is born of the unknown;
creativity arises from necessity.
What is so bad about getting lost
so that you can find yourself again?

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A Place of 50-50

We can get to a place of 50-50,
where the connection feels so fluid
that it doesn't matter who leads what
but that we move together.

Where my body
and my partner's body are one.
Where, together,
we are one entity.

Where my legs are his
and his legs are mine
and we have one heartbeat between us,
and, if even for just three minutes,
we forget about everything else,
we let go of our inhibitions and our fear
of not knowing who's in charge,
we breathe together,
we feel each other,
we share our souls.

modern man

I'm a modern, independent, strong woman; I need a strong, modern man.

Why "strong"? Because in this modern society where women are equal and men are struggling to understand where that puts them, strength of character is what matters. Letting your woman shine doesn't take anything away from you – it doesn't make you weak and definitely doesn't make you less of a man. The modern man is confident enough in himself not to feel threatened by the power of those around him; he can recognize and appreciate the beauty of a strong woman without feeling small. Because the union of two people is not a mathematical equation; the one entity created by two people has no limits. There is no negative. The parts add to each other rather than taking away. We both shine brighter when we celebrate each other's light.

Tigress

Once in a while, you come across someone on the same frequency as you. The other dances are nice, but you know what I'm talking about. It's like the difference between good conversation and conversation that entralls you, that you lose track of time because of. It's that incredible connection, so rare that it seems impossible. And it can happen at any given time – it can take you completely by surprise. Someone can bring something out of you that you didn't even know you had in you. And once you've had it, you want more. "Like sex," says Máximo of tango as we stand on the corner of Corrientes and Lambaré, "you don't know what you're missing until you experience it, but once you've experienced it, you want more and more."

When energies meet, sometimes the combination is explosive. Sometimes, together, you create something electric. Fire:

As we played with our feet and our movements
resonated through our bodies and back into the ground,
I felt the tigress in me roar.⁷

⁷ My Facebook status the day after one such encounter

Moving just to move

Sometimes we move just to move,
because we don't know how to live the stillness.
We keep running from one appointment to another,
we dance sequence after sequence,
because we don't know how to stop,
because we don't know
how to just be.
So we do "things" to fill up time,
we make jokes to fill the silences,
we speak empty words.

But each movement grows more beautiful
in the excitement of its anticipation,
and each pause is a chance
to celebrate just being in each other's company.
Seek to move because you feel it
and to pause when it seems right,
not because somebody said so,
but because you feel compelled
to do so.

Because in doing just to do,
we forsake the liberty of choosing;
we become prisoner to the clock.
Because action is a release
and pauses are a chance to gather energy;
because motion takes on value
when juxtaposed with tranquility;
because we appreciate the pauses
for the fact that they are a contrast to the running,
for the opportunity to breathe,
to ground ourselves,

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to revisit the connection with our partner,
to find ourselves once again.

Chocolate Nuances

“To someone who doesn’t like chocolate, like me,” said Rodolfo Dinzel, “it’s all the same.” To a chocolate connoisseur, there are infinite types of chocolate; she can perceive the subtle variations in different chocolate bars.

So it is with tango, or any discipline that you develop aptitude in: growing as a tango dancer means becoming more perceptive of the *matices* – the little nuances, the details. “When you’re hungry to learn and everything is new,” says Fernando Gordillo, “you eat anything. With time, you learn to choose.” You begin discerning what you like and what you could skip a second helping of.

You start noticing the subtle weight changes and pick up on differences in energy and momentum and qualities of movement. The more skilled you become at perceiving these details, the greater the range of possibilities you have to play with. Tango isn’t black or white. It’s gray, lots and lots of different hues of gray.

Beware of the dichotomy of black and white. Nobody’s simply good or bad. We define things to simplify them so that we don’t have to deal with the complexity of their essence. We box them up so they’re easier to categorize. If we resist the urge to label in the face of the undefined, we can appreciate the beauty of the complexity of the many nuances of each person we encounter.

Lines make us feel better, but that doesn’t mean that it’s better to see the world in homogenous blocks and circles rather than the intricacies of its uneven, irregular forms. It’s hard to teach the gray and often hard to grasp the gray, so people resort to black and white. Extremes and absolutes are easier to work with. But easy isn’t always better. Life is all about the gray. Life is about the chocolate nuances.

I am because I choose

From where to live to what to eat for dinner, to whether you should stay an extra day just because you're having such a good time, even if you already have a bus ticket to leave. You can't do it all – *todo no se puede*. So you have to choose.

Rodolfo Dinzel says that a teacher, like a doctor, needs to keep in mind that you can't give the student a whole bottle of medicine – take this. You have to know how to prescribe just the right dose.

He also says that as a student he realized that he always left with half of what the teacher said – make sure you leave with the half that works for you. "*No hay que confiar completamente en ninguna persona*," Rodolfo told me one day, "You should never completely trust any one person." Always have a back door, a secret escape route, he said. It's true. If we find someone who seems to be an authority on a subject, a genius, an idol, a *maestro*, it's easy to begin to take everything they say as ultimate truth. But having the option of saying "no," makes your yes's worth something. When we stop choosing, when we forget that truth is relative and right is relative and we stop thinking for ourselves, we no longer learn, we're no longer part of the process, we're no longer present.

As my dad, Arcady Condrea, used to say, you and only you are responsible for the decisions you make and you will be the one who has to deal with the consequences. Ask for advice, then choose for yourself and choose wisely. Intelligence is knowing how to choose.

Gabriela Condrea, born in Chişinău, Moldova and raised in Seattle, Washington, is an author, speaker, Argentine Tango teacher, writing coach, and student of life. After taking a leave from her job as an 8th Grade Language Arts (English) teacher in 2008 and



meeting tango along her route, her life changed completely. Gabriela began writing about and studying tango intensively, sacrificing the stability of a full-time job to reside in Buenos Aires for a total of 16 months in just over 2 years. In May 2010, she blended her passion for sharing with her passion for tango and began teaching classes and workshops on Argentine Tango. More recently, Gabriela has also combined her tango teaching, writing, and speaking to create interactive book presentations. She now shares her exploration of human connection through tango workshops, book presentations, and other collaborative ventures, in Seattle, Buenos Aires, and on her Book & Tango Tours around the world – connecting people through music, dance, and the art of writing.

For more information about Gabriela Condrea, her teaching and her writing, please visit...

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