

Why aren't you dancing?

Sara Crane



I have been out for dinner with my husband Simon, my brother Simon, and my sister-in-law and friend Jude. We decide to go to Stranges Lane to listen to Lyndon Puffin, a musician who is going to play at Simon's 60th birthday in a couple of months' time.

Stranges Lane threads between newly constructed concrete block buildings and hosts a proliferation of small bars and eateries that all face into the narrow corridor of the lane. The lane is a bit cold and not well lit, and it's not easy to tell which establishment is which. We can hear Lyndon playing quietly and make our way towards the bar. It's an odd set up. Lyndon is playing in a little corner on the edge of the corridor like laneway. There are probably about 20 to 30 customers here altogether. They are scattered around at tables, drinking and eating. Most of them seem to be occupied by their phones. The atmosphere is not encouraging.

I ask Simon to dance with me and as soon as I'm moving and smile at Lyndon, I feel better and the energy of his music lifts. I encourage Simon and Jude to dance too and I notice that people are watching us, but no one else gets up to dance.

In this moment, I am conscious of a strong longing to include others in the enjoyment that I am experiencing. I am struck by the way in which Lyndon's energy increases when the audience responds. As I look around, I am sure that at least some of the crowd are on the edge of including themselves in the dance.

I really want to encourage others to dance, so I make a decision to act in a way that will be a challenge for me. If I want to get something going here, I will have to do it fully. It would be easy to let my well-masked shyness and my personal distaste of intrusion to let me off the hook. I will ask every single person 'Why aren't you dancing?' Not in a critical way, but from the role of a friendly inclusive host.

I realize that I will be asking them to take a risk, a risk to be active and expressive. There may be role tests, and my assessment is that many of them have the capacity to rise up. I think they are up for it. I will find out.

I look around and approach the young couple nearest us. They looked friendly and are talking to each other. An easy first encounter. They reply to my query 'We're exhausted after work but we like watching you dance.' And 'We didn't really notice the music until you started dancing, we'll come back.' At this point, I'm realizing that this experiment may take some time. I'm alerted to the fact that I need to be prepared to engage. It's not just a survey.

The man sitting on his own nearest the exit looks up from his phone. 'I don't have anyone to dance with,' he quips. 'Come and dance with me,' I suggest and feel slightly taken aback when jumps up and joins me on the floor space near Lyndon (I can't call it a dance floor. It's part of the corridor.) I enjoy a couple of dances with him and then tell him that I'm going to ask everyone, 'Why aren't you dancing?' He says 'Good on you. I'm going to have another beer.' A little later I notice him waving to me cheerfully as he leaves the lane.

I sit down with a group of young people finishing pizza and beer and ask them, 'Why aren't you dancing?' They want to know why I want to know. I explain that I felt cold and a bit of an outsider when I came in but when I started dancing, I noticed that I enjoyed myself and so did the musician. Two of the guys say 'Why not' and get up. The girls say 'I might later.' I remark that sometimes I feel a bit self-conscious if there's nobody else dancing and then I just focus on the music for a while. One of the girls accepts my tentative doubling. She grins, pushes her plate aside and gets up. Then a couple more of their friends join in.

Next I ask the young man standing up on his own by the wall, 'Why aren't you dancing?' He says he'd love to but he's the security guard. I feel a bit silly and move on to the next table.

One of the young men says that this is his first day in Christchurch and he doesn't know anyone. So I ask where he's from and when he says Denmark, I'm able to introduce him to the Danish girl at the next-door table. This is becoming fun.

I am not nervous anymore so I have another little dance myself before chatting to the next group. Every time I ask 'Why aren't you dancing?' I get a response.

'I can't dance,' says a girl sitting on her own. Her words affect me a great deal. I feel cautious and respond, 'I think I mostly enjoy the music more when I'm dancing but sometimes I just like to listen.' I sit quietly with her and we watch the dancers and listen to the music together until she gets up and goes over to the bar. She turns and smiles at me as I bend down to talk with the group sitting at another table and I smile back. It turns out they are not together. They are simply waiting for food. They seem delighted to meet one another.

By the time I get to the end of the lane, there are more people dancing than not. Even the ones not dancing look more engaged and are connecting with one another. I have made some introductions by asking who they've come with. I've discovered that most of the young people are travellers and together we find out who is from where.

Lyndon is on a roll and the energy is high.

At the end of the evening, we all stand in a circle and sing together for the last number. I feel a strong sense of enjoyment as I look around and take in the warmth of expression through eye contact and holding hands. Everyone is holding hands! People are talking to one another with animation as they move out into the frosty night.

As I look backwards down the corridor, it does not look grey and uninviting. I see a mysterious alleyway full of potential. My perception of the physical space has profoundly altered through my experience.

Reflections

My whole notion of community has changed since the Christchurch earthquakes. I had previously considered that community grew in a place and was connected to specific groups of people. But in the 2011 earthquake, I lost the central city community in which I had worked, the people, the places, our shared dreams, the things we did together. I felt as if I had lost part of my identity. It is not surprising that I long for a sense of shared community and of belonging, and I recognize that desire in others; the ones who stayed, as well as those who have left their own places of belonging and are travelling through, or settling in, Christchurch.

My current view is that community and a sense of belonging can emerge freely from within any group, and that validity is found in the shared experience and may be fleeting. I speculate about the ways in which I can use this knowledge to create enough connectedness in this new phase of my life, and the ways in which I can co-create this sense of intimacy with others.

I notice how life giving even little snippets of shared experience can be. To take the smallest opportunity to encourage people to connect with one another seems a worthwhile endeavour in the reduction of isolation and in the service of humanity.

I hypothesise that it is possible and worthwhile to create these small opportunities for community and belonging that bring joy and solace, and this may well have a ripple effect. My dream is that people all over the world will become more active sociometrists, highly valuing relationship and having the ability to make intelligent, sensitive and potent interventions. I have a vision of communities celebrating life in relevant ways so that steady relationships and joy are part of the everyday norms.

I am aware that the roles I warm up to are crucial in enabling me to be effective. Openness and flexibility, a playful touch, and attention to emotional tone and timing assist me to follow the warm-up of a group (or a non-group). My over-developed functioning as saviour of the world and mother of all need severe restraints. I have to let go of the 'what ifs', the endless possibility of more.

As I reflect on this experience, the best way I can describe it is that I gave myself and others a spontaneity training workout, and this had a good effect.

Everyone has their own creative style. Maybe J.L., if he'd been there, would have taken over the microphone and *instructed* everyone to dance, and then had them role reverse with one another. My provocation to you is to have a go ...



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