

The 11th Commandment

by Ed Foote

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If you Google the “Ten Commandments of Square Dancing,” you will find several variations, and every one is well written. But all of these Commandments have one thing in common, namely: **Be considerate of others.**

Whether they talk about bathing, being kind, smiling, not having alcohol before a dance, being a good listener, or getting into squares quickly, the Commandments all boil down to one thing: Everyone is here to have **fun**, so do not do anything that keeps people from having **fun**.

But there is one Commandment that is never written and is rarely spoken, yet everyone agrees that it exists. **The 11th Commandment is: Thou shall learn the calls.**

This Commandment is not written or spoken, because many people find it socially unacceptable to do so. The rationalization is: “We are here to have fun, and learning call definitions is not fun. Our real purpose is to socialize, smile, be pleasant and only learn enough in class so that we can exist in a square. If this means having to be pulled through the calls, so what, because our real purpose is to socialize, smile and be pleasant.”

But where is the fun in having the square break down time after time? Where is the fun in causing seven other people to stop and square back up because one person does not know the calls? Sure, everyone is expected to laugh and joke about breakdowns, and this is fine up to a point. But what if we go past this point? What if breakdowns occur time after time because a few people do not know the calls? Are we still having fun?

When dancers do not learn the calls, they negatively impact the fun of everyone in the square.

I am **not** saying that people should be excellent dancers, able to do calls half-sashayed or left-handed. I am saying that it is logical for dancers in a square to expect that the others in the square are at least “average.”

In the past year I have seen many examples of dancers who are a disaster, who should not have been allowed to graduate and who should not be allowed on the floor of a standard average dance.

I’m being too strict you say? What about the woman who turns away from her partner on a Right & Left Thru? What about a woman who goes the wrong way on a Right & Left Grand? What about the man who wanders around when he hears “Circulate” called when he is in the center of an ocean wave? What about the man who always tries to Courtesy Turn on a Square Thru? What about people who break down consistently on Square Thru, or who constantly turn around in place?

These are not just brief mental lapses. These are blatant examples of people who have no idea of what is going on. It will not be very long before dancers cease to laugh at this, because their FUN is being severely impacted.

Let's go back to the previously stated common theme of the Ten Commandments: **Be considerate of others**, and ask a few questions. Is it considerate to force people to pull someone through, because that person has not bothered to learn the calls? Is it considerate to others in class when someone shows up without having bothered to review what was taught the week before?

Is it considerate of others for a class dancer who has missed several lessons to just show up without ever having called the teacher to find out what has been taught on the nights that were missed? Is it considerate for a person who has graduated to just go through the motions, laughing every time he/she breaks down a square on simple calls, as described above? Are others laughing at this? Are others having fun when this occurs?

Next month we will look at the impact that not following the 11th Commandment is having on the square dance activity.

The 11th Commandment - part 2

Last month we said that the 11th commandment is: **Learn the calls**. This is not a written anywhere, but obviously it is a requirement in order to be able to square dance.

It was noted that when dancers perform so poorly that they must consistently be pulled through, this refusal to learn the calls negatively impacts the **fun** of the other dancers.

Square dancing is a TEAM game. If everyone on the team is not doing his or her part, it hurts everyone on the team. Why do some people refuse to learn all the calls? There are several answers.

(1) They are lazy. They just don't want to be bothered. Since people seem to accept them socially at the club no matter how poorly they dance, why bother learning the calls?

(2) They do not realize how poorly they dance. They are under the delusion that they are just as good as most of the other dancers in the club.

(3) They are selfish. They think only of themselves, and they have decided they do not want to learn all the calls. They never consider how their actions hurt others in the square, by causing them not to have an enjoyable dancing experience. Personally, I would be appalled if I knew that my insistence in participating in any activity was causing others not to have fun, but some people are this way.

(4) The culture of the square dance activity rewards mistakes. You make a mistake, and everyone laughs and jokes. This is fine for a few times. But when this happens time and time again, you quickly get the message that no one cares if you make a mistake. So why work to learn the calls, when it seems perfectly acceptable to make mistakes?

Note: I do not blame the class instructors. Naturally, different teachers have different abilities. But I have seen too many examples of poor dancers graduating from classes taught by excellent instructors to blame the teachers. These same people will still be poor dancers two and three years later.

What is the result of this failure of dancers to learn the calls, thereby being inconsiderate of others in the square? **Answer: Experienced dancers quit.** Not right away; many dancers hang in there for years. But eventually always having to pull people through wears people down.

Dancers are expected to laugh off the mistakes of others, **but when does this cease to be funny?** If experienced dancers are expected to pull people through night after night, week after week, month after month — are these people still laughing? No, they are dropping out, because this is not what they signed up for.

Dancers keep saying to me privately that they are tired of pulling people through year after year, people who make no effort to learn the calls, so they are going to drop out. But they can not say this publicly. Why? **Because it is socially unacceptable to do so.**

The result is the good dancers just stop going to dances. “Gee, we haven’t seen Bill & Mary lately — I wonder what happened.” When someone calls this couple, Bill and Mary say: “Oh, we’ve just gotten involved with other things (grandkids, volunteering, travel, bridge, just name anything).” Translation: “We have found other things **more fun** than square dancing.”

Bottom line. Square dancing is not rocket science. It has been proven by tens of thousands of dancers that learning the calls is not that difficult. But **learning the calls** is a fundamental part of square dancing. It does require a little effort. When people do not make this effort, because no one says this is important, the result is poor dancers.

Until we name the 11th Commandment, print it, say it out loud, and make it equally as important as all the other Commandments, nothing will change.

Until we give equal weight to the 11th Commandment, the big emphasis will remain at recruiting new dancers in the front door, while experienced dancers leave quietly out the back door. Some will cry out: “too many calls,” lessons are too long” — the list goes on and on. But the name of the game in square dancing is knowing the calls. To ignore this puts the entire activity at peril.