

# **“Sociability in a Covid Era”**

## **2021 CALLERLAB Virtual Annual Convention General Meeting**

### **Keynote Address**

#### **By Mike Seastrom**

We've all been going through one of the most shocking, unprecedented, incredible times that any one of us has ever experienced. We have heard the cliché, “We're all in this together,” and the truth is that a great number of us have dealt with this individually or with just a small group of family and friends. Many that live alone have dealt with this entire socially distant pandemic by themselves. The challenges of having most of our social ties reduced to a bare minimum have caused increases in depression for many and an increase in loneliness too.

This year-long, massive shifting of our gears has had a monumental effect on every single one of us. It's also made those of us in the square and round dance activities realize how rich the social connections inherent in our dance have been for all of us.

Some years ago, one of our distinguished members let us know, in no uncertain terms, that we must change our point of view as callers. He said that the dancers don't always come just to dance just to us. They come to see their friends and socialize. He told his story about being frustrated trying to get the people to square up at a dance. He said that they were just sitting around and talking with each other and it was like “pulling teeth” to get them out of their seats. They came to see and socialize with each other and not to just dance to him. Dancing was not their first priority. Now that's a pretty hard pill for a caller to swallow.

Our mentor further emphasized that we must focus on the sociability in our activity and not only the puzzle of our dance if we want to preserve it for future generations. That distinguished member I'm talking about is Jim Mayo. Jim spoke of the importance of the sociability part of our activity in many Board of Governor's meetings and Past Chairman's Committee meetings. This pandemic has now made us see his point very very clearly. Thank you, Jim, for your persistence and for making this “sociability theme” such a focus for us.

The 2020 CALLERLAB Convention near Reno, NV that was cancelled early during this pandemic, had a theme called, “Focus on Social Connections.” That same theme was to be carried over to the 2021 Convention in Dallas. I believe that this theme should remain as momentum for our next live Convention.

Speaking of Conventions; I'd like to congratulate the Executive Committee, the Board of Governors, and the Home Office for being able to put together a Virtual Annual General Meeting this year. I'm sure this last year has been a journey of amazing proportions, and again I compliment everyone who has been so instrumental in making this event happen and for keeping the business of CALLERLAB going throughout this difficult time. To Teresa Berger, Dana and Donna Schirmer, and Royce Dent, our home office staff, I thank you and salute you!

During the planning period for the 2020 Convention in Nevada, I happened to be calling in Denver, Colorado and my wife, Lisa, and I met with Bob and Allynn Riggs for lunch after calling for their group. I asked Bob how the Executive Committee meeting went, and he mentioned that they had formed a Social Connections Committee and were looking for a chairman. I couldn't resist and volunteered for the position. I had just agreed to do an Interest Session on Social Connections with Lisa and with caller/cuer

couple, David and Dawn Mee, at the 2020 Convention and it seemed like a natural fit. I even later conned David into being vice chairman of the committee.

As it turned out, Bob and Allynn Rigg's daughter, Kristina Book, has a master's degree in Experiential Education and teaches character and leadership courses to cadets at the Air Force Academy. Experiential Education, by simple definition, involves learning through action and involvement, which is how we teach square dancing. Kristina grew up dancing and through her I've learned that there is an entire science that revolves around team building and social connections.

Our Social Connections Committee will focus on increasing the understanding among callers, cuers, and dance leaders about their role and the opportunity they have to expand and grow the sociability in their groups. We are also committed to building a resource of ideas encouraging social interaction that will be available on the CALLERLAB KnowledgeBase. Barry Clasper, Dottie Welch, Kris Jensen, and their crew deserve an enormous amount of praise for their work on the KnowledgeBase. What a phenomenal resource for our activity and its leaders.

I had a life changing event that had happened to me before volunteering for this Committee assignment that stimulated my interest in this topic. The story goes like this. I was flying back to Alabama to do a square dance weekend and, like most callers, coming east from the West Coast, I had a midway connection. It's common for me to land in Dallas just in time for lunch, so I made my way to the closest and what looked the fastest place to eat. There were a couple seats open at the bar just outside of a TGIF Restaurant, so I stopped to catch a quick lunch.

As I sat down in the middle of this bar, the bartender, who introduced himself as Jim, immediately gave me a menu, asked me my name and where I was from. These were two easy questions that didn't require too much thinking and I quickly said, "My name is Mike and I'm from Los Angeles." The bartender said, "Well right next to you, Mike, is Bill. He just flew in from Germany. On your other side is Maggie and she just flew in from Michigan. Take a look at the menu and I'll be right back."

Maggie was busy talking to the lady next to her and so I turned to Jim who immediately asked me, "Are you heading home or going someplace else?" I said, "I was headed to Alabama for the weekend," and he immediately asked why I would be going to Alabama. I told him that I was calling a square dance festival and his eyes opened wide. He said what many of us have heard before, "I haven't done that since grade school."

The bartender returned and gave Bill his lunch. He took my order for a salad and an iced tea and about that time Maggie, sitting on the other side of me, jumped into the conversation. As Maggie, Bill and I continued our conversations about square dancing, Germany, and Michigan, I realized that all up and down the bar, everyone was talking and connecting with a whole bunch of fun and energy. All this energy was engineered by one guy, who had us all really engaged with each other and with him and having a great time. That lunchtime went by amazingly fast, and I left feeling energized and thinking how much fun that lunch was. I'm sure Jim the bartender received great tips too!

I realized as I walked away that this one man had such a major impact on everyone's experience while having lunch, and I thought to myself how we as callers, cuers and dance leaders have the same opportunity when we call or attend a dance or club event. Learning simple social skills like introducing people you know to others, bringing other people into a conversation you are having by relaying something you know about the person are just some of the skills one can learn to enhance the social connections in our groups.

Many callers I know are inherently shy and really have to work at getting “out of their shell” to greet and talk to people at their class or dance. Many of us have really worked at “reaching out” to our dancers and continue to develop this over the years. Most of us have our own style or have a style that is a mixture of what we've seen other callers and dance leaders do. It is something that most of us recognize and work at because we know that interaction makes it fun for the dancers and for us.

Another event that had a major impact on me occurred during and after a keynote address just like this. Ed Foote gave a keynote speech at the opening session of a CALLERLAB Convention, and it changed how I approach calling and teaching from that day on. The key takeaway for me from Ed’s speech was that we as callers have this amazing gift that we've been given by just being a caller. We have the ability to make others feel good about themselves. Whether we compliment a club officer, recognize another caller at our dance, or playfully interact with dancers on the floor from the mic, we have the ability to compliment or recognize someone and make them feel good about themselves. There is no finer feeling than to make someone else feel good about themselves.

Think about being able to tell your kids how proud of them you are or raise the spirits of your grandkids because you compliment them for who they are. Even a simple compliment like, “I love your T-shirt!” or “That’s an amazing drawing!” can make them feel wonderful and you feeling just as good.

Thank you, Ed, for changing my perspective that CALLERLAB Convention and a big personal thank you to CALLERLAB for the first-class caller education you’ve provided for so many of us through the years. My batteries get charged up for the whole year when I attend a Convention.

\*Stretch, Breathe, Smile, and make Faces Exercise.

\*Power Point Presentation

The invitation that was sent out for the 47<sup>th</sup> CALLERLAB Convention in 2020 talked about the theme, “Focus on Social Connections.” That invitation went on to say, “Square dancing is a community of dancers as well as a recreational activity, and developing social relationships is important if a community is to survive and thrive. During the Convention we will explore the critical role social interaction and relationships play in the success and growth of square dancing. The goal is to foster a wider understanding of the role and responsibility to strengthen sociability, and to sustain participation in square dancing. We’ll discuss how to actively develop, support, encourage, and participate in social interaction and relationships. The theme of the Convention is one of the many steps CALLERLAB is taking to focus on social connections for our activity.”

This Convention theme and keynote address is largely due to one man, and that’s Jim Mayo. I’d like to read part of an article that Jim wrote that appeared in the CALLERLAB Viewpoints section of *American Square Dance Magazine*. It was written and published in the magazine long before this pandemic. It’s titled:

### **“Our Gift to Society”**

“We, MWSD, have a wonderful gift for modern society. Over the last couple of years, I have become steadily more aware of our need for social interaction. I hear frequent mention of it in the media and, if you look, you can see signs of it all around you. People want to interact with each other and today the chances for that are shrinking. Our activity could offer one of the best opportunities for that interaction—if we could stop making it more difficult.

Club square dancing provided exactly that kind of social contact when it began after WW II, and we thrived because of it. Today society is different but the need for people to do things together is, perhaps, even greater than it was 70 years ago. We could serve that need and in some places we do. Unfortunately, many of today's SD programs make it very difficult to take part. Our choreography is much more challenging, and our social interaction has shrunk. Even the dancing is less comfortable and learnable than it was.

We've talked about this and we have even designed experimental programs that we hope will make us more accessible. Unfortunately, we have mostly ignored our most valuable asset. We callers, and the remaining experienced dancers, keep thinking that choreography is our most appealing aspect. It is NOT. Sociability is. People want a place to meet and be involved with other people. The square dance club is nearly perfect for that if we didn't make participation so difficult.

Over the last 30 years or more we have made a huge increase in the complexity of MWSD. Only if you can handle constantly changing dance routines are you welcome in our clubs. Even singing call routines don't repeat. The number of parties that clubs run has shrunk, and the club management group has also shrunk. It doesn't take as many board meetings to run a club as it used to. Those meetings weren't necessary. They were social opportunities.

We have clubs, even today, that are thriving and growing. In many cases they have made the dancing easier and the social interaction opportunities more available." Jim finishes the article with this statement, "MWSD could be a huge social interaction center if we would only let it."

Well Jim, I could not agree more. We have an activity where participants must work as a team and that physical contact as a team dancer increases our spirit of friendship and community by its very nature. That spirit continues when we're not dancing.

In the new dancer setting, the encouragement that is extended by our experienced dancers is a cooperative way of caring for others and supports socialization in such a positive way.

In most of our clubs and dance groups, when someone is sick, passes away, or needs help in some way, that support and help from other dancers in that group can be so helpful.

Many of our clubs volunteer for community events, raise money for charities, and support other service groups in their area. It's been recognized for a long time now, that another key to happiness is getting outside ourselves and helping others. Our dance groups have helped those in need for years.

In the 60 plus years I've been involved in dancing, I've never seen a bigger opportunity to reboot and refocus how we lead this activity going forward. Yes, we will have a transition period before we fully return to some form of normalcy, and what that new norm will be is a bit of an unknown. It may take time before some people will be willing to get out and be around very many people outside their own "bubble." Yet, I'm excited about this dance activity of ours and it's future.

If we, as leaders, learn more ways to develop our social skills and become better social ambassadors, better mentors, and teachers, we have the perfect activity to offer just what we need more of in our communities today. Let's not miss this golden opportunity to help our activity continue to evolve and get back to focusing on what has kept most of us actively involved for years.

I don't know about you, but I can hardly wait to see so many of you and get back to dancing and calling again!