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Only The Dancing Is Square

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We went to a square dance a while back and were embarrassed to discover what a good time it was. It's easy to be churlish living the yuppy lifestyle, particularly when you don't know what you're talking about.

The amount we knew about square dancing could have been - and was - tossed off in select snide remarks about middle-age women in petticoats and overweight men in Western shirts. Or frozen in the arrested-development

memories of sixth-grade dancing classes.

This particular evening, a fund-raising event for our children's day-care center, knocked our preconceptions for a loop and taught us something about humility and the roots of social intercourse.

Though my wife is on the center's board of directors, we really didn't know any of the people at the dance very well. What do you expect from an institution whose sense of community is defined by infants and toddlers dropped in a safe house by parents pursuing the disparate passions of careers? A day-care center is a place where the social currency for adults is the knowing nod exchanged, parent-to-parent, coming from or going to the car at morning or evening.

This says a lot about us.

The issue isn't day care - without it we'd all be cooked (and ours is exemplary, by the way). What is revealing is how little we routinely know about people around us.

Sometimes it takes odd social exercises to break down barriers.

The square dance was held in a church basement in Wayne. It had been set up community-supper style with red-checked tables arranged in a U facing the dance floor.

There were straw hats on the tables for decoration and oversized table- labels with square-dance terms like do-si-do and allemande left to set a mood.

The walls had cowboy and cowgirl cutouts fashioned by our kids, and someone had created a cardboard barnyard - cow, sheep, chickens and ducks - to stand

sentry at one side.

It may not have been Oklahoma City, but it wasn't exactly Main Line. The people who came didn't seem exactly Main Line either, although they were, of course, if you want to be particular. A square dance, we discovered, is a quick device for weeding out the stuffed shirts in a crowd. It requires willingness for silliness and the social grace to smile when you've stepped on someone's foot. It is definitely not for those with fear of faux pas.

There's something to be said for the way people dress for a square dance. To our surprise, most of those who came "came Western," and the ease this brought to the affair was refreshing. How different from how we ordinarily use our clothes - as tools toward advancement or social status or image. They don't call it dressing up for nothing.

The dance itself is a great invention. It runs on a series of formulas, yet varies them so that nothing becomes routine. It allows a degree of personal expression, yet affords the comfort of having someone tell you what to do.

A good caller - and ours was "the genuine article," as several remarked - leads a group with a gentle firmness, smoothing the rough edges of choreography, fusing the diverse personalities of the dancers, while making smooth, sweet music of step-by-step instruction.

The most remarkable thing about the dance are the social dynamics. A square dance abides no wallflowers, tolerates no aloofness. In a square dance you interact with those around you, and not just your partner. It's a very courtly enterprise: You greet those next to you and make contact with all the others in your group as you move through the patterns. And most important, you seal these interactions with a touch - a hand, an elbow, a waist. There is no room for incivility here.

Little wonder that the square dance was a popular part of colonial and frontier life, and still is popular in some quarters, though not widely. It was a means of bringing people together in the absence of anything else in common.

It still has the ability to do that. Even now, in a world where often we speak but don't touch, meet but don't connect.

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On this night in Wayne, we found it a welcome bit of community. For we are all pioneers lost in our own frontiers.

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