



CHAPTER 3

“What Brings You Joy?”

“While I dance I cannot judge, I cannot hate, I cannot separate myself from life. I can only be joyful and whole. That is why I dance.”

—Hans Bos

*W*hile we were planning the Dyson event, I had noticed something different about our CFO, Evelyn Calleja. She hadn't lost weight but she seemed lighter. Evelyn was always the most adventurous among us—she had tried stand-up comedy, owned a bar, and learned to give Reiki treatments. I wondered what she was up to now. She seemed cheerful, energetic, clear-thinking, and impressively efficient. It was a stark contrast to the bleak and empty feeling I still couldn't seem to shake five months after 9/11. I was beginning to worry that my malaise might turn into full-blown depression. If Evelyn had access to some sort of magic potion, I was willing to try it.

“There's no magic,” said Evelyn. “I've been working with an executive coach named Suzanne Levy.” Thrilled at how straightforward her solution was, I booked a session right away.

I had barely settled into the chair at Suzanne's office when she got right to the point. “So tell me,” she said, “what is your purpose in life?”

I was taken aback, even though I asked prospective employees the same question in every job interview. For years I had a snappy, business-focused response if anyone tossed such a question my way: “Five years, five million dollars in fee income, fifty employees.” It was an easy-to-remember mantra, which actually helped us achieve that goal (but in

seven years, not five). Nowadays I was in too much of a funk to get excited about a business goal or any other long-term plan. Instead, I started thinking once again about my husband's declining health and the nearly three thousand people who had perished in the Twin Towers attack.

"I'm not talking about your career," Suzanne continued. "I mean your grand mission in life, your true purpose on this planet. Take as long as you want to think about it."



I reflected on how I could live my life so that I would be ready to go whenever it was my time. I knew that doing this meant I had to live every moment in a way that was fulfilling in and of itself, not dependent upon some future I might not have.



Over the next two weeks, I struggled to come up with a mission that rang true for me and that I could get excited about. I wondered how many people in the World Trade Center had been full of unfulfilled dreams and happiness tied to some future event planned for that weekend, the

next summer, or even some years later. I reflected on how I could live my life so that I would be ready to go whenever it was my time. I knew that doing this meant I had to live every moment in a way that was fulfilling in and of itself, not dependent upon some future I might not have.

At my next coaching session, I was ready to share my “grand mission” with Suzanne: “My purpose in life is to choose joy each day, to be mindful of that joy, and to share that joy with others.”

No sooner did I end that sentence than Suzanne asked, “So what brings you joy?”

“Dancing.” The word popped out of my mouth before I could think, and I must have looked surprised because we both laughed.

“When was the last time you went dancing?” Hard as I tried, I couldn’t remember.

“Interesting,” said Suzanne. “Your homework assignment is to book yourself a dance lesson before our next session. Do you know the name of a studio?”

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“Of course,” I was able to reply. I did have the name of a dance studio. My friend David Moyer had given it to me two years prior and I had been carrying it around in my Palm Pilot ever since. David was the man responsible for my moving from Maui to New York in 1979. I had been calling PR executive search firms in Manhattan, trying to line up a position before I made the move. David worked at one of these firms, and of all the people I spoke with, he was the nicest. He was also the most honest, telling me, “No one will take you seriously unless you live here. If you really want to do this, quit your job in Hawaii, move to New York, and then start your job search.” And that’s what I did.

David and I have been friends ever since. He is six foot four and a dead ringer for David Letterman. (He used to work in the same building as Letterman and reported that one time the two of them had been alone in the elevator. “Hey, you look just like me,” said Letterman. Always quick on his feet, David retorted, “No, you look just like me.”) David’s tastes are eclectic, ranging from harpsichord recitals to opera to Scottish dancing. Many of his passions strike me as endearingly quirky, but when he told me that he belonged to a waltz society, I was intrigued. I had written down the name of the studio where he took lessons—Pierre Dulaine.



My homework assignment was looming, but I waited until the last minute to arrange for my dance lesson. It’s the perfectionist’s way: if you can’t do it perfectly, avoid doing it. I had never taken dance lessons as a child, despite the fact that

I practically lived in a pink tutu when I was six. I had not a smidgen of technique to fall back on, so I was pretty sure that my first lesson would be humiliating at best. Two days before my next coaching session, I finally called the Pierre Dulaine Dance Studio. They were able to squeeze me in the following afternoon.

I had been carrying the studio's address around with me all this time because, for me, there was only one type of dance worth learning: ballroom dance. Today millions of people know what ballroom dancing really is thanks to *Dancing with the Stars*—copied in some fashion in more than thirty countries—and the major dances are recognized by young and old alike. However, when I began taking lessons in 2002, the American version of *Dancing with the Stars* was three years away from its debut, and ballroom dancing was unknown to much of the general public. For Generation Xers and baby Boomers like me, it was dancing that our parents or grandparents had done in another era. If people pictured anything when they heard the term “ballroom dance,” it was the very formal International Standard style of dancing, where partners held each other closely while sweeping around the dance floor with great precision and speed, the woman arched backward at an alarming angle with a wide, frozen smile on her face.

But ballroom dancing is so much more than that. To me, it symbolizes the Manhattan I had fallen in love with when watching all those old movies, where Fred and Ginger dazzled the crowds at the Stork Club and El Morocco. Of course, by the time I arrived in Manhattan in 1979, those

clubs were long gone. CBGB on Bowery Street was the hot scene, and its blaring punk rock was a universe away from the elegant nightlife that had fueled my childhood fantasies. It was a shock to realize that I had lived in New York for more than twenty years and never taken a dance lesson, even though it was the vision of Fred and Ginger that had propelled me here in the first place.



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I took a cab to the Pierre Dulaine Dance Studio right after work. I was expecting a spacious ballroom with a grand entrance at street level, but the studio was located on the fourth floor of an undistinguished office building on West Thirty-First Street. Exiting the elevator, I entered a dark, narrow hallway lined with photos of dance world luminaries such as Tommy Tune and Cyd Charisse. There were also

photos of a young, debonair Pierre Dulaine and his dance partner, Yvonne Marceau. The couple had been four-time winners of the British Exhibition Championships in the late 1970s and early '80s. In the black-and-white photos, Dulaine looked a bit like Antonio Banderas who, in fact, played the role of Pierre Dulaine in the 2006 film *Take the Lead*. That film was a fictional version of the award-winning documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom*. Both films were inspired by the New York City public school system's "Dancing Classrooms" program, which Pierre had founded in 1994. The program used ballroom dancing to teach fifth-graders about civility and etiquette, and treating one another with dignity and respect. At the time of my first lesson I knew nothing about Pierre's impressive background or "Dancing Classrooms," and *Mad Hot Ballroom* had yet to be filmed.

At the end of the hall sat a reception desk, and just beyond it was a rather shabby sitting area. I informed the friendly young woman at the desk that I was here for a lesson with Mr. Dulaine. Within a few moments, an older version of the beautiful young man in the photos strode out and grasped my hand. His hair was now salt and pepper, but he was still compact and well groomed, and charming in a slightly affected and theatrical way. He led me past the sad, carpeted sitting area, which opened to the dance floor—a long windowless room with mirrored walls. The floor could be divided into two sections by heavy red velvet drapes that hung from the low ceiling. It wasn't exactly the grand ballroom I had envisioned.

Four other couples were on the dance floor, each doing a different dance. Three of the women were about my age,

and were dancing with much younger men, whom I assumed were ballroom teachers. One elderly gentleman was dancing with a much younger female dance teacher. The students were all intently focused on trying to follow their teachers' instructions. From the sitting area, people sat chatting and watching the dancers. *Wonderful . . .* an audience. Self-consciousness flooded my body and I stood frozen on the dance floor.

"Did you bring dance shoes?" asked Pierre.

"I brought these," I replied, holding up a pair of low-heeled pumps I had packed for the occasion.

"They'll do for now. Go ahead, put them on."

I quickly slipped into the pumps and Pierre led me to an empty spot at the edge of the floor. He stood about a foot from me and positioned my arms, the right one straight out so he could grasp my hand, the left bent at the elbow with my hand lightly resting on his shoulder.

"We'll begin with the foxtrot," said Pierre. "It is a basic box step. To the right, forward, to the left, and back. Slow-quick-quick. Slow-quick-quick."

I stiffly attempted to follow his lead, feeling like a marionette. The simple pattern was trickier than it looked. I tried to concentrate, but I kept peering past Pierre's shoulder to see what the other couples were doing. One teacher and student were moving rhythmically toward each other and back again, swiveling their hips to a bouncy Latin beat.

"That looks fun!" I said. "Can we do that dance?"

"You'll need to learn the basic steps of rhythm dances like the cha cha and rumba before you learn the more challenging

steps of samba,” replied Pierre. “The foxtrot is one of the most popular smooth dances.” I hadn’t a clue what *rhythm* or *smooth* meant.

“Slow-quick-quick. Slow-quick-quick,” Pierre repeated patiently as he danced me through the foxtrot basic step. My feet seemed disconnected from my brain. For the first thirty minutes I was acutely aware of the other dancers and the people watching me. Had there ever been a slower student? The other women wore short swingy skirts or long, full ones, and my black pantsuit made me feel even more out of place.

By the end of the hour I had finally mastered the box step. I could match it to the music, and for a few brief moments it felt like real dancing. I was winded, my legs hurt, my feet throbbed, and my arms ached. But I signed up for another lesson. On the elevator ride down I mused that for one full hour, I had not thought of a single thing other than the foxtrot.

At my next lesson, Pierre led me through the rumba basics, which, like the foxtrot, followed a simple box step. Instead of “slow-quick-quick,” the rhythm was “quick-quick-slow.” I had forgotten half of what I had learned the previous week, so it was a good thing the rumba box step wasn’t more complex.

Suzanne, my executive coach, was thrilled that she had gotten me onto the dance floor. After that successful first step, she prodded me to do other things for myself that I had neglected while trying to take care of everyone else. Some of these, such as finally setting up my personal banking online,

were simple, yet they freed up precious time. A major gift from Suzanne was her encouraging me to say “No” to people if I needed to—especially, “No, I can’t do that because I have a dance lesson.” Suzanne knew that dance could be the vehicle that transported me to a more joyful existence.



When I arrived at the studio for my third dance lesson, Pierre told me he was partnering me with a new teacher. I wondered if he was shunting me off to someone less experienced, but all uncharitable thoughts vanished when I laid eyes on the matinee idol who was crossing the dance floor in my direction. If I had asked central casting for a teacher, six-foot-four Tony Scheppler would have been that man. Impeccably groomed, from his wavy, jet-black hair to the cut of his pleated trousers and polished shoes, Tony had the look and fashion sensibility of a 1930s heartthrob. I later learned that he had appeared in the wedding reception dance scene of the movie *Mona Lisa Smile* and had proven to be a bit of a challenge to the director because he was better looking than the leading man.

At first, concentrating on my dance steps was even harder because tall, dark, and handsome Tony was quite a distraction. However, it was soon apparent that not only was he a marvelous dancer but also a truly gifted teacher. His passion for dance was infectious, and he had a friendly, easy-going style of instruction. Tony’s exaggerated impressions of my mistakes were so funny that I couldn’t help but loosen up in my dancing. At the same time, his pantomimes made

my missteps perfectly clear, which made it easier for me to improve. After my first lesson with Tony, I stood on the sidewalk in front of the studio, chuckling at the foxtrot we had managed to perform all the way through. *I'm not half bad*, I thought to myself. I don't know if it had dawned on me, but I was not only dancing like I'd dreamed of doing as a child, I was laughing again.



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I learned more about my new teacher in the following weeks. Tony was a former high school football star from Canton, Ohio, who had taken dance lessons as a teenager to learn how to leap higher on the field. He fell in love with dancing, quit football, and quickly became a national amateur ballroom dance champion, later turning professional. When I met him, Tony had been dancing for about fifteen years and had won many national titles.

From Tony, I learned not only how to dance but also about

the dance world and lives of the other dance teachers I saw practicing every week. Some were top-ranked professionals in the ballroom world, and their skill was astonishing. Why, I wondered, were they teaching the likes of me how to foxtrot?

The not-so-glamorous reality is that being a world-class dancer, even a world champion, barely pays the bills. In order to subsidize their professional careers, the dancers often have to work at least one other job. They usually teach amateurs at independent studios like Pierre Dulaine or chain studios, such as Arthur Murray or Fred Astaire, and they often earn additional money by competing with their students in “Pro-Am” competitions. Some dancers are also costume designers, creating the elaborate gowns and striking men’s dancewear the competition circuit demands, or they do hair and makeup at the competitions. Sometimes they work part-time jobs outside the ballroom world.

While Tony and I were dancing, he was focused on teaching me steps and “figures,” which are a series of steps. After a few lessons with him I felt more comfortable and less awkward and self-conscious. We must have been quite a sight—Tony, tall and perfectly proportioned, and me, four foot ten and heavysset, with hair cropped shorter than his, and a face highlighted by chunky, black-framed glasses. Despite the difference in our statures, we moved gracefully together.

It’s no secret that dancing is a very intimate act—you are held closely in the arms of your partner, and he leads you through the dance with his fingertips, hands, arms, hips, thighs, and feet. If he needs to change direction or adjust the routine in order to navigate the dance floor, you feel it

without his having to say anything. That wordless communication takes place every moment when you're partner dancing. Having long been a teacher, Tony naturally was accustomed to the closeness of partner dancing. For me it was a rare blissful hour not only of movement but also of touch. It wasn't exactly sexual but it was sensual, and a buzz of sexuality was always in the air.

I hadn't focused on my body that intently for years; if anything, I had purposely ignored it once I knew that I might not be having sex for a very long time. They say your body holds sense memories, and as I danced with Tony my old self came flooding back—memories of Assad when he was well, of Hawaii, of all the ways I used to move and feel.

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After six months of dance lessons, I had my last coaching session with Suzanne. "I'm so grateful to you for leading me

to ballroom dancing,” I told her. By then my lessons were easily the highlight of my week, and within a year I would be describing ballroom dancing as a passion. I had never had a hobby before. I had poured all my effort and creativity into work. Now that I had found something I loved doing as much as public relations, I knew I would have to be more efficient with my energy so I could accommodate both passions. Yet as physically demanding as dancing was for me, it actually seemed to give me extra energy for the other areas of my life. I mulled this over with Suzanne at our final session.

“Here’s my theory,” I said. “No matter how dedicated and driven you are, and no matter how successful you’ve become, there comes a time in your career when you’re going to hit a wall. Maybe you’re overextended, taking care of family and work and everyone but yourself. Or something traumatic might have happened, like 9/11, which shakes up your view of the world. Maybe you’re just burned out on the job. But you hit a wall, and the usual advice is to change jobs or positions within the company, or retrain for a new career. Instead, the solution might be to learn something that has nothing to do with your job or everyday life. Something you have no experience in, that’s completely outside your comfort zone. And ideally it should be something physical so you have no choice but to be fully present and paying attention every second.”

“You mean like tapping into the flow?” Suzanne asked. I knew what she was talking about—the state people achieve when they’re creating, when the mind focuses on a task and the rest of the world slips away. It can happen any time you

concentrate fully and become one with the activity, whether you're cooking or gardening or fixing a bicycle.

"That's different," I said. "For me, painting or hiking wouldn't work. I'd just keep thinking about the job or my other problems. I'd be multitasking again. It's as if every atom of my mind and body must be fully engaged. Only then can I really experience a total respite from my job, and the total respite is what revitalizes me."

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Although I had only been dancing a short while, one thing had already become clear. I always felt invigorated the day after a lesson. I had more energy for work and more patience when caring for Assad. I thought it might be the serotonin that was released from all that aerobic exercise, and no doubt that was part of it. But I had taken plenty of exercise classes, and they had never affected me this way. In addition to being fun and reconnecting me with parts of myself that

I had feared were gone forever—my youth, my femininity, and my childhood dreams—dancing engaged me because it was an entirely new domain. It wasn't something that came naturally to me, or that I could execute effortlessly, like PR. I couldn't coast the way I could in the bland routine of an aerobics class. My mind couldn't wander, or I would lose my balance and end up on the floor (yep—that happened). Ballroom dance was a totally new world, where I had to learn not only the moves but also the territory and the language, and do this in tandem with a partner. After all those years, I finally was learning how Ginger must have felt following Fred Astaire around the dance floor.



Over the first several months I was dancing with Tony, he schooled me on the complicated rules and categories of ballroom dance. There are two main styles, American and International. Only in the United States are both styles danced; most of the rest of the world dance the International style exclusively. Each style has its own version of dances that fall into two categories: International Standard and American Smooth dances, and International Latin and American Rhythm dances.

The standard/smooth dances include the waltz, tango, foxtrot, and Viennese waltz. An additional dance, the quickstep, is part of the standard repertoire only. These dances progress around the dance floor via a line of dance, a counterclockwise rotation around the room. The male partner negotiates the line of dance, navigating around the other couples

on the floor. Standard is a rather formal, technical style that allows only closed dance positions, meaning positions where the partners stand very close together, facing each other, with their bodies parallel. Both hands have to be in contact with the partner's body at all times. In contrast, American Smooth style allows open and separated positions. Partners can be connected by only one hand and sometimes not connected at all, and they don't have to remain in close contact or parallel to each other throughout the dance. Overall, smooth is a freer style of dance that allows for far more individual expression. This is the style Tony dances, and what he was teaching me.

In International Latin and American Rhythm dances, the partners don't move around the dance floor as much as in standard and smooth but stay in a limited area. Some of these dances, such as the jive and the paso doble, are exclusive to International style. Some, like the East Coast swing, bolero, and mambo, are exclusive to American style. And there are a few crossover dances performed by American- and International-style dancers, like the cha cha, rumba, and samba, which are danced to similar music but with differing patterns and styling.

This simplified explanation of ballroom dancing is the tip of an iceberg of rules, steps, figures, routines, syllabi, categories, and skill levels (Bronze, Silver, and Gold) codified by the International DanceSport Federation, which governs all amateur, pro-am (where a professional dances with an amateur), and professional ballroom dance competitions. DanceSport was a name invented in the 1980s in an effort to position competitive ballroom dance as an Olympic sport (as of the 2008

Olympics, it had not been invited to join). It was intended to differentiate competitive partner dancing from social dancing, which took place in dance clubs, and from exhibition dancing, where professional dancers performed before an audience—on a cruise ship, for instance, or in a Broadway show.

I was intrigued when Tony told me that Fred and Ginger's famous dance club sequences actually bore a resemblance to the dancing done in clubs and dance halls of the 1910s–1940s. During that era, professionals were hired to perform at the clubs so patrons could see the latest dances and learn the steps. In 1920 Arthur Murray brought dance to the average citizen when he began publishing mail-order lessons. He launched his popular chain of dance studios in 1938. In 1947 Fred Astaire opened his own studio on Park Avenue in New York. Fred Astaire Dance Studios became a nationwide chain that, like Arthur Murray Dance Studios, continues to flourish today.

Arthur Murray, Fred Astaire, and other studios marketed dance not only as a healthy activity but also as a way to ascend the social ladder: if you knew the proper steps, you could dance alongside the Rockefellers and fit right in. Murray's mail-order lessons included not just the famous paper footprints (large sheets of paper with footprints in the pattern of specific dance steps, which students could place on the floor and follow), but also tips on manners and etiquette. For the World War II generation, knowing how to foxtrot and waltz became a valuable social skill, which they made sure their children learned as well.

The popularity of dance studios and partner dancing began to wane in the 1950s. By the 1970s ballroom dances were

widely seen as throwbacks to another era, useful to know for weddings and not much else. But for some people, partner dancing retained its allure, and the dance industry adjusted to appeal to those who were still drawn to the glamour. The 1980s saw a rise in the popularity of ballroom dance, as it provided newly wealthy baby Boomers with a fun and extravagant pastime. While dance lessons didn't have to be expensive, there was no limit to how much you could spend on private teachers, fabulous gowns, and travel to competitions if you had the money and were bitten by the bug.

Ballroom dancing slowly started regaining momentum. In 1992 Baz Luhrmann directed an Australian film about competitive dancing called *Strictly Ballroom*, which became popular on the independent film circuit and was eventually screened in eighty-six countries. Then, in 1996, the Japanese movie *Shall We Dance* became an international hit. This sweet, critically acclaimed film told the story of a staid, conservative businessman going through a midlife crisis who conceals from his wife the fact that he is taking ballroom dance lessons. The film got my attention because of its Japanese cast. Prior to that I had only seen images of WASPs as ballroom dancers. (The American remake of *Shall We Dance*, which starred Richard Gere and Jennifer Lopez, didn't fare as well as the Japanese film. I don't think the premise of an American businessman secretly taking dance lessons was as great a cultural shock as it was in the much more reserved Japanese culture.)

The real breakthrough in public awareness of ballroom dancing would come in 2004, when the BBC retooled *Come*

Dancing, a long-running show about competitive ballroom dance, as *Strictly Come Dancing*, a show where celebrities were partnered with professional dancers and competed against one another. In 2006 ABC would launch an American version, *Dancing with the Stars*, and ballroom dancing would explode.



The siren call of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers had also bewitched many of the other dancers I met at the studio, professionals and amateurs alike. To this day, many consider Fred and Ginger to still be the gold standard of class, style, and skill when it comes to partner dancing. It's those two we are thinking of when we step onto the dance floor in our Technicolor ballroom world.



The musicals I had loved growing up were half a century old by the time I took my first dance lesson in 2002. Yet I

discovered that the siren call of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers had also bewitched many of the other dancers I met at the studio, professionals and amateurs alike. To this day, many consider Fred and Ginger to still be the gold standard of class, style, and skill when it comes to partner dancing. It's those two we are thinking of when we step onto the dance floor in our Technicolor ballroom world.

The romantic image in my head of Fred and Ginger was accompanied by another: the fantasy that I could swirl around the dance floor in the arms of my very own, tall, dark, and handsome prince, Assad. Unlike the *Shall We Dance* character John Clark (Shohei Sugiyama in the Japanese version), I was not holding out on my husband at all. My Arabian prince knew all about my ballroom dance lessons. In fact, not too long after I'd begun dancing, Assad and I took some group ballroom classes together. Assad's willingness to do this was no small thing given that he grew up in a very religious Muslim household where dance was strictly forbidden. We ultimately decided after a few frustrating attempts at the foxtrot that ballroom dance was my passion, not his. Assad was just happy that I had finally found a hobby—something that I'd never had before—and one that brought me such joy.



My dance lessons were fun, but because I only took one lesson a week my progress was slow. Tony knew that in order to really improve, I should be taking more lessons. I hesitated, not yet willing to allow myself more than one hour a week of pure diversion. One day Tony casually said, “You

know, with some more practice I'll bet you could dance a showcase."

"What's a showcase?"

"It's a dance recital at the studio where students perform for their friends and family."

I laughed out loud. "I'm not dancing in public. That's ridiculous!" But when I got home and told Assad about the idea, he was all for it. "You should do it," he said excitedly. "Then we can all come and watch you perform." *Great! That's just what I don't want*, I groaned inwardly.

The thought of dancing in public, even if it was just for friends and family, was terrifying. I was not a performer—not at all. I could make a presentation to a client, I could pitch a new business prospect, and I could deliver a speech to my colleagues in the PR industry, but that was hardly the same thing as waltzing around a dance studio in a ballroom gown and high heels. But Tony kept asking me about it, and one day he sweetened the deal with an offer I couldn't refuse. "I'll choreograph a special samba routine for you if you'll do the showcase."

I had nagged Tony to teach me the samba as soon as we started dancing together, so his offer to choreograph a samba routine made me momentarily forget my fear of having to perform it in front of an audience. My whole body responded viscerally to samba music, which I had loved even before I knew it was samba. It's the bounce in the music that makes dancing the samba so joyful.

Samba is considered the most difficult of the rhythm and Latin dances. Not only is it fast but producing a proper

“samba bounce action” requires coordinating pushes, ticks, and circles from foot to ankle to knee to pelvis to hip. Some dancers accentuate the distinctive pelvic tick with abdominal crunching. The tick initiates a figure-eight motion of the hips. If it’s below your rib cage, you’re working it when you samba!

So many moving parts to the samba, but I *loved* this dance of celebration and joy! Tony’s offer to choreograph an entire samba routine for me was irresistible.

Once I agreed to do the samba showcase, I increased my dance lessons to three times a week. That’s when my partners at PT&Co. started to get nervous. Business was still very dicey, and although the agency was a collective, I was the one in charge. The stress of running a collective was one more thing that had begun to wear me down. It had been a long, exhilarating road, but after twelve years I was tired of trying to get consensus on all the main issues while also satisfying my powerful alpha urge to control every detail.

Patrice Tanaka & Company Inc. (or PT&Co. as we were also known) was founded in 1990, when I led a buyback of our PR agency from the advertising behemoth Chiat/Day, our then-parent company. Chiat/Day was a creative powerhouse—and borderline sweatshop—named “Agency of the Decade” by *Advertising Age* and nicknamed “Chiat/Day and night” by its overworked and stressed-out employees. The small PR agency where I worked, Jessica Dee Communications (which I helped the owner grow from a four- to a twenty-person shop), was acquired by Chiat/Day in 1987. Jay Chiat, the agency’s visionary founder, had the

idea of providing clients with all marketing services under one agency umbrella, or as he referred to it, “the whole egg concept.” Our agency was acquired to provide Chiat/Day clients with PR support. Two years into our acquisition, founder Jessica Dee resigned and I was left running our PR subsidiary.

By 1989 I was managing a team of twenty-five talented, creative, and sometimes eccentric PR pros, and we had produced our most successful campaign to date, for Korbel Champagne. It began with a simple ad we placed in the classified section of the *Wall Street Journal*: “Wanted: Director of Romance.” The idea that such a corporate job actually existed captured people’s imaginations and garnered huge publicity, as well as more than twelve hundred resumes from lawyers, bankers, CFOs, and other executives desperate for a little romance in their lives. The Director of Romance was one of two positions we filled in creating corporate America’s first-ever “Department of Romance, Weddings & Entertaining”—all of the occasions people celebrate with champagne. This campaign, which we ran for four years, ultimately resulted in a 50 percent growth of Korbel Champagne sales during a period when the overall champagne/sparkling wine category actually declined 12 percent.

Our romance with Korbel ended when the company decided to consolidate its PR and advertising under one roof—and it wasn’t Chiat/Day’s. It was early 1990 and the money train of the roaring eighties was beginning to lose steam. Budgets were tightening, even at Chiat/Day. I knew that when I told management we had lost our biggest client,

they would make me fire the four members of our team who had worked nearly full-time on the brand. If I did so, we wouldn't have the talent or expertise we would need to replace those lost billings. I started wracking my brain for a way to keep the team intact, and the only solution I could think of was to buy back the agency from Chiat/Day so that I could have control over firing and hiring decisions.

There were several problems with this plan. First, I had no idea how to go about it. Second, we had no money. Third, not everyone on my team wanted to break off from the hottest ad agency in America. I spent the next few months in meetings with the eleven key individuals at our PR agency, painting a picture of what would happen if the economy went into a recession, something many of our clients said was inevitable. I told my colleagues that Chiat/Day would likely decide to batten down the hatches and focus on its core business of advertising. That meant the company would either shut down or sell off all of its subsidiary operations, including us. With the worsening economy, I proposed we not just sit around waiting for the other shoe to drop but instead proactively approach Chiat/Day about letting us buy back our agency. After weeks of meetings, I finally got a majority of my eleven key colleagues to agree. Now all I had to do was persuade Jay Chiat.

Bronx-born, blunt, and obsessed with pushing the advertising envelope, Jay was the undisputed creative giant of the era. He demanded fierce loyalty from his employees and could be brutal and petty if displeased. I carefully planned my approach, calculating that he might be in a more generous

mood if I called him while he was attending the International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado. I had attended this gathering the previous year with Jay and my ex-boss, Jessica, so I knew that Jay would probably be in a relaxed and expansive mood. This future-focused conference, where intellectuals opined on design as a strategic force in improving business and enhancing global prosperity, was a tonic to Mr. Chiat. I waited until he was in Aspen for a couple of days, and then I started calling him. When he finally returned my fifth call, I launched into a heartfelt speech about how unhappy we were at Chiat/Day because, as PR practitioners, we were treated as second-class citizens within the advertising agency. I asked him if he would please let us buy the agency back so that we could focus on doing great PR, which was the reason Chiat/Day had acquired us. After a very long pause he said, “If you’re saying that you all want to do this, I guess we’ll have to come to some accommodation.”

“Jay, thank you so much. I really appreciate—” *click*. He hung up on me.

Chiat/Day wanted one million dollars for our PR subsidiary. We didn’t have it. We finally arranged a deal where two colleagues and I would turn in our Chiat/Day stock and also give Chiat/Day a royalty on our revenues for the next three years. PT&Co., an employee-owned PR agency, was born in July 1990. A few months later, I hired Evelyn Calleja, our controller, putting our agency at thirteen employees.

In retrospect, I’m not sure I would again form a company with twelve other co-owners and operate it with a consensus-style management, but at the time it felt like the

right thing to do. When I was growing up, my mother always told me, “Share your cookies and toys.” It seemed to me that if I was asking people to start a new company just when the economy was heading south, sharing the risk and potential reward made sense. Ed Lipton, the lawyer I hired to negotiate the deal, disagreed vehemently. In fact, he begged me not to do it. “It’s difficult enough for any new business to succeed, even with just one owner,” he warned. “The problems are magnified if you have two owners. But twelve owners? That is just insane!”

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He was wrong. It worked, but it was not easy. What I didn’t think about at the time was that everybody was at a different stage in their lives, professionally and personally. We ranged

across the age spectrum from midtwenties to midforties, and our employee-owners' level of maturity reflected that. While many of us understood that having our own business meant having to work even harder, others thought it meant that as an "owner" you were entitled to work less and to decide for yourself what you would or would not do. The group decision-making process could be excruciatingly slow. It took years just to develop a shareholders agreement. A lot of time was spent defining our responsibilities and authority as "owners"—time that could have been focused on growing our agency.

Yet in the end, thirteen people with thirteen different perspectives created not only a successful public relations agency but a family-friendly workplace that embodied the values upon which we all agreed. At the core of our philosophy was the belief that, if we took care of our employee-owners, they would, in turn, look after our clients in this service-oriented business. PT&Co. was a "workplace community" committed to working together and supporting one another. Moreover, as a workplace community, we believed that our agency had an obligation to contribute in a positive way to the greater community in which we operated.

This sense of PT&Co. as a workplace community was put to its first test during the recession of 1990–91. We didn't know it at the time but July 1990, when we started the agency, was the official start of that recession. Within six months of buying back the agency, we lost half our billings. When that happens, the prudent response is for the agency

to reduce its staff accordingly. I knew, however, that if we laid off half of our employee-owners, it would just be a matter of months before everyone else abandoned ship. There was only one way forward: no one should be let go, everyone should take a pay cut, and we should all redouble our efforts to build the agency. And that's what we did.

Twelve months later, lifted by a recovering economy, PT&Co. had grown 100 percent and we were back to the amount of billings we had when we started the agency, without having lost any employees. In the process, we gained the knowledge that even in the worst of times we would not abandon one another. Instead, we would support one another and protect our workplace community. Together, we carved out a niche for PT&Co. as an agency committed to creating great work (because that's what attracts and keeps clients), a great workplace (because that's what attracts and retains top talent), and great communities that work, meaning healthy, sustainable communities (because we wanted to contribute in a positive way to making the world a better place). By the mid-1990s we were winning prestigious clients and dozens of awards, including two I treasure the most: “#1 Most Creative Agency,” awarded in 1997 by *The Holmes Report*, a major PR industry trade media outlet, and the “#2 Best Workplace” among all PR agencies in America.

When the economy started to shrink again in 2000 with the dot-com bust, we weren't immediately affected because we didn't have a heavy base of technology clients. We felt more than strong enough to weather a slight dip in business. By 2002, that confidence had been shaken by the one-two

punch of the 2001 recession and the terrorist attacks on 9/11. So when I started disappearing at 6 p.m. sharp, or in the middle of the workday to go to a dance lesson, it set off alarms for my partners. One afternoon, as I was about to leave, Ellen popped into my office waving a document.

“Aren’t you going to edit this memo?” she asked me.

“No.”

“Did you look at it?”

“Yes. I think it’s terrific.”

“You didn’t even look at it.”

“Yes I did.”

“Where’s the red ink? Where are your edits?”

“No edits. We’ve worked together for fifteen years. I’ve decided to finally trust you,” I joked. It was true. And now that I was preparing for my samba showcase, I had neither the time nor the inclination to pick through every piece of copy, tweaking it until it was exactly the way I wanted. Something had to give.

“Hmmm,” said Ellen, and left my office looking worried.

I hadn’t confided to my partners how depressed I had been before I started taking dance lessons. It would only have added to their anxiety. I alone knew that dancing wasn’t a hobby, it was a life raft. Reclaiming my life was a conscious act that required scheduling time for me on a regular basis. In order to stay effective and creative at PT&Co., supportive of Assad, and excited about the future, I needed to be as committed to myself as I had always been to my work, my husband, and all my other obligations. Right now that meant dance lessons three times a week.

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I'll always be grateful to my life coach, Suzanne, for asking me, "What is your purpose? What brings you joy?" When I blurted out "Dancing!" little did I know that it would lead to a lifelong passion, or that the lessons I learned on the ball-room floor would help me guide PT&Co. through its most turbulent years.



INTERMEZZO

Foxtrot

EVERY BALLROOM DANCE has its own distinct essence and attitude. Former ballroom champion Marianne Nicole believes that people's personalities match certain dances: romantic (bolero), joyful (samba), or perhaps just plain difficult (mambo, because no one listens to the "one" beat). If that's true, then foxtrot's personality would be breezy. When the nervous newcomer stands awkwardly on the dance floor, feeling shy as a kindergartner and just as knobby-kneed, the instructor can be confident that within a few lessons even the most hesitant student will be able to master the foxtrot's basic moves.

Sauntering across the floor, the foxtrot embodies the saucy coolness we associate with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers when they're taking it easy to a Cole Porter or Irving Berlin tune. Many a wedding couple has made its debut as Mr. and Mrs. with a simple but charming foxtrot. Why foxtrot? Because in its most basic form the foxtrot teaches two of the foundational skills of smooth dances: standing up straight and walking in harmony with a partner. If you can walk, you can foxtrot. And if you can abandon the Hunchback of Notre Laptop look, you can also appear elegant doing it.

Most of the patterns of foxtrot follow a slow-slow-quick-quick rhythm, and, just as in walking, you never have to worry which foot goes next, a question that panics nearly every beginner. If you are leader, it's always left, right, left, right, and so on. For follower, it's always right, left, right, left. (As Ginger Rogers noted, she had to do everything Fred did, only backward and in heels.) In the basic foxtrot step, the leader takes a long, slow stride forward with the left foot, then another slow forward step with the right foot, then a quick side step with the left foot, followed by the right foot quickly closing to the left foot. Forward, forward, side, together. The follower walks in a mirror image with a slow stride back on the right foot, another back on the left, then a quick side step with the right foot, followed by the left foot quickly closing to the right foot. Back, back, side, together.

Walking in harmony, even with a beloved, takes coordination and sensitivity. That's why it's a dance, not a pleasant stroll. One of the key ways to indicate movement or direction is through frame, which is the shape and connection of the leader's and follower's shoulders, arms, and hands.

Many observers of ballroom dance like to say, "The man is the frame and the woman is the beautiful picture," but frame is an equal responsibility for the partners. The leader is not holding the follower up and out with the strength of his arms. The follower holds up her own arms. The leader is not using frame to push and pull the follower to the right place. The follower receives the signal initiated from the leader's frame and then puts herself there. The leader cannot move more than the amount of space the follower opens up for him. Without cooperation, the couple is not going anywhere!

Since foxtrot does not make big demands of speed or sway from the beginner, it's also an ideal dance for learning how to have a good frame with your partner. You will move as one and not look like you're

squabbling your way across life's speed bumps, arguing, "I'm the boss," "No, I'm the boss!"

Foxtrot teaches you how to relax and enjoy the benefits of teamwork on the dance floor. If you're moving backward, you can enjoy the reassurance of a partner who can see where you're going and will protect your interests. If you're moving forward, you can appreciate the generosity of a partner who responds to your every motion with keen attentiveness. The sheer harmony of partner dancing will have you humming Frank Sinatra-style, "Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak, and I seem to find the happiness I seek, when we're out together dancing cheek to cheek."

