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## Finding Connectedness in Buenos Aires: Argentine Tango as Antidote to the Human Condition

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We all know the value of connections. Business school professors learn not to overestimate students' interest in our subject matter: they're there foremost to make connections. Our research indicates that their payoff does come from schmoozing: status, wealth and power correlate highly with connections (and not at all with grades or test scores).

Networking can lead to many kinds of success, but even the best-networked can still feel vaguely out-of-touch. We can network to advance our careers, even to find better spouses, yet a dull ache of separateness remains: from others by conflicting interests and the limits of communication and from ourselves by competing pulls and the limits of self-knowledge. Philosophers take these disconnects as an impassable metaphysical barrier, an isolation intrinsic to the human condition, which we can only hope to (partially) transcend through bonds of blood, love, work, and culture.

But far from kith and kin, toils and struggle, far from all I'd ever known, I stumbled through a different, secret passage. Doing the dance of 19<sup>th</sup> century home-sick laborers in depressed districts of Buenos Aires until the time I normally wake in the morning, I found a primal connectedness – to others, self, and beyond.

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Enlightenment came in spite of myself. My *wife* had been tango dreaming for years, but I wrote off dance as a frivolous use of time, and what I perceived as the exaggerated drama and self-absorbed seriousness of tango made it easy to resist her periodic pitch to learn. But when I was invited to teach a course in Argentina, she would no longer be denied. She arranged an Argentine vacation and private tango lessons—to be taken with or without me—in preparation. Persuaded, barely, by spousal obligation and sunk costs, I tagged along.

After a few classes, I become engaged—at first less for the dance itself than the community. Theoretically, community emerges from dense connections of shared interest and experience. We imagine it as the glow emanating from trust and good feeling in neighborhoods, churches, and workplaces where strong bonds once upon a time were forged. At a *milonga* (a tango dance party), community is totally unexpected because there are no sociological ties at all. Tangueros comprise a *mélange* of professions, the full adult age-range and ethnicity from around the globe. Politics and religion are hardly discussed and work is only mentioned in passing. There's not even that much flirting. But from the onset, I felt an affinity. Our first event was a potluck dinner at our teachers' home. Basic economics teaches circumspection about potlucks and personal experience (e.g., bringing an organic casserole only to find pizza, chips, and shop-rite cola) has justified wariness; yet here was sushi, broiled salmon, fresh water chestnuts and other healthy delicacies obviously prepared with care. I suspect now that the absence of common ties makes this community. The *milonga* is not about economic gain or advancement. We avoid networking because that would contaminate the connections we are there to make.

At this first event, I was most impressed by a dancer who, as it turned out, was not particularly skilled in steps and combinations, but whose motionless pauses and piercing movements seemed to embody the passion in the music. Watching him, I understood the histrionics of bad movies and ballroom-competitions as caricature. With connection to music and a partner, tango becomes an opportunity to feel and express emotions we otherwise keep tightly under wrap. Not only passion. US adults laugh only 15 times per day, compared to 400 times a day for children. Most tango songs are sad or passionate, but many are light, driving and lilting; and others are fast and fun. Laughter was my parting memory of that first *milonga*. As the

evening warmed, guests piled up on a small sofa and everyone on and in the human mounds got a child's worth of laughs.

My amazement at finding community in dance was doubled by discovery of recreation so satisfyingly complete: pleasing to *all* the senses, wholly engaging body and mind (including those silent sectors so difficult to access) and, even, during the series of faster dances, aerobic exercise. The more I learned, the more I became engaged by the dance itself: a challenging two-body physics problem—but one solved leg-to-leg, cheek-to-cheek, and chest-to-chest with women to music! In the two weeks before our trip, I got serious about tango and tried to dance every night.

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Our Argentine vacation began with four days and nights in Patagonia – a tourist area in the far south. Tango is not widespread outside of Buenos Aires (BsAs), but we stayed in a town that did have a tango bar, *Rincón del Tango*, a hospitable little off-street stucco and mirror cave. Each evening we took a lesson in which we were instructed to “communicate with the torso.” I found this a pleasing mode of communication, but it turns out to be only halfway to the real thing—BsAs' milongero style, in which partners press their torsos tightly together while dancing in embrace.

By the time we arrived in BsAs, I was feeling pretty confident. We went to a large salon where several levels of classes were offered. I asked the attendant about the difference between the intermediate and advanced classes. She asked how long we'd been dancing (two months, a dozen lessons), then laughed and sent us off with the beginners—where we were taught how to walk! I felt sufficiently underestimated that I skipped the walking part of the class in favor of stretching ... but, as it turns out, there's more to walking than we normally appreciate. As for dancing, it takes six months to become a competent follower and *two years* to become an able leader.

It took awhile to figure out how to learn there. The many classes held in one large room created a confusing, cattle-drive quality. An alternative is the mixed-level lesson that precedes most milongas. Our first such lesson consisted of ten couples taught a pattern and left to crash into each other. We learned to go to afternoon and 6:00 dance lessons. That's too early for most Argentines, so for a nominal fee we could get

a semi-private lesson – sometimes with renowned dancers. One problem with taking lessons like this, however, is that every teacher has their own style. Particularly problematic is ... the walk! Some step toe-first, others heel-first, and still others right in the middle. Some bend their knees; others emphasize leg elongations. Most instruct us to walk “naturally,” yet they inevitably begin by correcting whatever it is we naturally do. Because of these style differences, it’s difficult to make rapid progress using a variety of instructors. But as a practical matter, we took whatever classes we could whenever we could. For each class, I tried to clear my mind, take in that style, and learn that lesson.

In the end, I came to see learning different styles of walking as a worthwhile experiment in the mechanics of human motion. One similarity between body connection and networking is the intense dual awareness of other and self. Both require clear understanding of what you are doing and what you expect of your counterpart. Establishing a good tango connection is difficult because we literally don’t know how to take the first step. What tango maestros mean by walking “natural” is that it should look natural and feel natural to our partner, not that we actually do it naturally. Everyday walking that we loosely take for granted must be tightened up for tango: align bodies, engage thighs and abdomen, maintain vertical axis and linear momentum, displace weight, and step deliberately. These mechanics make everyday walking look good too. Americans may drive the best cars in the world, but we are walking Yugos, scuttling head down to get from point A to point B or waddling obliviously from the parking lot to the store and back again. In contrast, tangueros don’t just go from one place to another; they use their whole body, they make eye contact, they display an attitude that asserts, “Here I am,” and whispers, “Join me.”

Once we can carry ourselves, we can connect to a partner. Tango schools also differ fundamentally on the embrace: Most US classes are taught dancing at a “respectful” distance, bodies at least a few inches to a foot apart. Some people have difficulty even with that: they lean back to increase the distance, even though having a workable dance connection requires forward inclination. In BsAs, most teachers teach *milongera style* or *apilado* (chests pressed firmly together), which is the way most Argentines dance. When my partner and I were dancing apart in a group class, the teacher, without saying a word, put a hand on each of our backs and plastered us tightly together.

North America has largely forsworn close body contact outside of sex, especially for men. But how much of what we imagine to be sexual desire, I wonder, is really a longing for body contact and closeness? Tango holds many charms, but most fundamental is the *abrazo* (deep embrace or hug). Dancing in close embrace with an attractive woman is bliss (most of all with my wife of course 😊), but more than sexual titillation, an *abrazo* is human warmth and closeness. After a week in Argentina, I was dancing *apilado* with a male instructor when we didn't have enough women. I felt uncomfortable for a few moments, but then I thought, What the hell? This was, after all, how tango developed: longshoremen and prisoners passing time practicing with each other.

As much I as was already beginning to like tango, close embrace clinched it. Aside from the pleasure of the position, close embrace allows one to lead more kinetically than intellectually. By comparison, arm leads are more like pushing and pulling a not-quite-domesticated animal. Leading your partner around the dance floor torso-to-torso—now that's connectedness! I experienced at-one-ment.

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If I could, I'd pause the story now and invite you across the globe to a BsAs milonga. Aside from a fine wood floor and wall-length mirrors, it's an ordinary hall, casually adorned with checkered tablecloths and neatly dressed people sitting respectfully. The light is bright enough to see well, but sufficiently dim so that the visual does not overwhelm the other senses. An orchestra's playing: rich melody on piano, dexterous bass grounding the music, the bandoneon and violin rising above with emotion. Not too loud, not too soft, the music, like the light, supports rather than overwhelms the experience. A new series of songs will soon begin. If you're a woman, I am getting ready to initiate a dance with you; if you're a man, you're getting ready to initiate your own.

I look at you, you return my gaze, I nod, and walk towards you, close enough to establish physical contact. If we've danced before, I know how you like to be held, what steps have worked together, and what I'd like to try to do this time. Or perhaps you're a stranger. I've watched you dance, and want to experience what it's like to be with you.

I offer my left hand, the way you receive it suggests an appropriate embrace. We exchange

pleasantries as we wait to feel the music. We lean into each other. I feel your breast against my chest. I inhale the fragrance of your hair. My right arm encircles you, but does not restrict your motion. We transmit an intense concentration through our bodies. I feel the music and propose some moves; you follow and respond. If simpler steps work, I become more daring; we may fail and laugh, or come close and try again, or succeed. I'm aware of your heart pulse, respiration, and mood: pleasure, relaxation, or tension. I give you time and space for expression. There is only you and me ...

... and then not even. We have no worries or thoughts. Our feet become the drums for the orchestra. We navigate the floor as one and in communion with all the other dancers. The music has its beginning, its mid-part, its adagios and impulses, then the preparation for the ending, and finally a flourish *al fin*. The music stops, we hold our embrace for an instant, and then separate.

Followers sometimes enter into a tango-trance. Leaders experience total absorption. We lead the follower, but follow the music, the moment, and the flow of the group. In a faster song, we may spin until we're light-headed; sound, sight, and body becoming an intoxicating blur. In a dramatic passage, we might do a calesita—you lean your full body weight on me while I rotate you on your axis. We can do lunges, spins, or sacadas, in which I step directly in between your legs and displace your body. Tango offers a bottomless bag of pleasant tricks.

In the classic tangos, there comes a moment mid-song when the orchestra is playing, we are dancing close, and everything about the world, even sadness and loss seems OK, more than OK, perfect ... the world is right, even mysteriously just, and it all fits together in a reassuring harmony ...

... and then, the best interpretations take us beyond the familiar. There is a passage in an Alfredo DeAngelis orchestra rendition of La Cumparsita (you know the song, it's the most famous tango of all) when from the midst of the familiar refrain, the violins soar and take us airborne. We fly to a height where we are no longer mortal, shimmering above even life's most beautiful melodies, spinning and turning up a highway to heaven.

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Tangueros commonly joke about the dance as religious experience: BsAs is “Mecca” and trips there are pilgrimages. It’s a joke, of course, but like religious holy lands, the city does inspire an extraordinary outpouring of emotion.

Tango explores the full range of emotion, but most prominent is sadness. BsAs has suffered hard times of late, but *tristeza* as a city theme long precedes recent economic troubles. When tango developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Argentina was one of the richest nations in the world, and here are a few cheery lines from a nationally famous 1925 poem, “Versos a la Tristeza de Buenos Aires” by Alfonsina Storni:

Si en una de tus casas, Buenos Aires, me muero  
Viendo en días de otoño tu cielo prisionero  
No me será sorpresa la lápida pesada ...  
Cuando vagué por [tus calles] ya estaba yo enterrada.

If in one of your houses, Buenos Aires, I die  
Watching, in autumn, your prison sky  
The heavy tombstone will be no surprise...  
As I wander your streets, I'm already buried alive.

The historical sadness is partly due to isolation: to the east is the Atlantic; to the west, the Andes; to the south, Antarctica. Even Uruguay is across a river 100 miles wide! Beyond the immediate barriers to the north and west is Latin America, with which Argentina has never identified. The European nations from which Argentina emigrated are more than 6,000 miles away, for all practical purposes on other side of the world.

As my family was leaving and I began to work, a US friend who is an Argentine expatriate happened to visit. Like most upper- or middle-upper class Argentines, César is not a tanguero. He explained that tango for him is like country western for me, not something he would ever seriously listen to, let alone dance. “Melancholia for the hicks: my girlfriend left me, my mom is dying, I lost my job ... oh, and the cat is sick.” He decries the whole tango mentality: Argentina abounds with opportunities, but Argentines would rather complain and feel sorry for themselves than prosper.

César’s disdain betrays a second source of sadness: poverty. Tango is not the music of the polo set, but rather of poor immigrants in a rich country. Poverty is not a happy condition under any circumstances, but surround it with fantastic, unattainable wealth; mix in contempt; and ... well, at least you have tango.

Ideology aside, César’s analogy to country music misses the mark: tango is closer to jazz and blues than country; it is the music of an urbane sensibility and sensuality: rich and varied both musically and lyrically. Like the blues, tango reflects the sadness of powerlessness. BsAs is Argentina’s New York, Washington, Los

Angeles, Boston, San Francisco, New Orleans, Atlanta, and Miami all rolled up into one. It's the center of finance, government, entertainment, academics, culture and counter-culture, sport, transportation, and virtually the only port of entry for the country. Yet much of its history is of a subjugated city. Since the nation's infancy, BsAs and its liberal attitudes have usually been on the losing side of power struggles with provincial *patrones* (estate masters) and *caudillos* (despotic strongmen who often use brutal tactics to maintain control). Votes in Argentina have never mattered as much as guns and money, but even electorally, the liberal, middle class "Radical" party based in BsAs, has generally lost out to the "Peronists," a sloganeering, hard-to-ideologically-pin down (fascist?) party supported by provincial caudillos and workers. Until just a few years ago, BsAs could not even elect its own mayor, who was appointed by the (usually opposition) national government.

Nevertheless, whether despite lack of political power or because of it, BsAs has thrived as a charming and sophisticated city, in which cosmopolitans from around the world have invested their money and their lives. But the sense of powerlessness abounds in the sad music, in the attitude my friend so disdains, and in the tango. 'My sweet partner,' the dancers seems to say as they move together in intricate patterns, torso to torso, leg teasing leg, 'we cannot change the world, but we can hold each other close and share the night.' And so it goes in the *media-luz* of the milonga until the sun rises and forces the tanguero to pay his daily pound of flesh in the workplace.

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On several evenings, César and the faculty at the elite private school at which I taught showed me *their* BsAs—exclusive restaurants and clubs to see and be seen while you eat, drink and chat (largely about which places are the *most* exclusive). César was quick to befriend a young lawyer we met who had organized an association for bouncers, pro-bono, so as to obtain an open door to the city's hot spots. I suppose Argentine elites are not atypical in their preoccupation with exclusivity; the way to advance in the world is by dressing right, being in the right places, and developing the kinds of connections that one can subsequently exploit. Personally, however, after eight to ten hours of regular working, I find evenings net-*working* oppressive.

The milonga is less a place to advance in the world than relief from it. Refuge from the world is usually conceived of as solitary or small group retreat, but tango offers refuge in a social world. That world

unto itself, the self-absorption I once deprecated, now seemed an unqualified good — a world of beauty, grace and intelligence. In contrast to César’s careerist cabals and worldly power plays, tango connections are “other-worldly,” an antidote to the demands of career. Milongas are places to share a laugh, hold someone and be held, to connect through consolation and camaraderie. As I write these words, it occurs to me that perhaps César is right: consolation and camaraderie *are* salves for losers . . . but then I realize it’s a language trap, a symptom of network culture. Moreover, because consolation is for losers, we expunge it from our lives, a purge which deepens estrangement from others and ourselves.

A musician asked me to translate a few classic tangos into English for his band to sing and record. I expected a challenge in translating Lunfardo, tango’s own dialect drawn from prison and wharf lingo of a century ago. But Lunfardo is relatively easy; the difficulty comes in representing sentiments in English. As it turns out, the language of criminals and street toughs is too soft for American English. Consider tango’s most famous singer’s most famous song, Carlos Gardel’s *Mi Buenos Aires Querido*. How do you translate “querido”? Nominally, it means “dear,” “beloved,” or “cherished,” but these are formal, antiquated terms. “Querido” is anything but! It is the warmth you feel when you share a laugh with an old friend, when you think of your first kiss, or when you see your wife and children after a two-week business trip. We don’t have words in the US that legitimize these sentiments . . . which is why I had to travel 6,000 miles to legitimately experience them.

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As I began to pack my bags to leave, I cried—in part because it feels OK to cry in BsAs. In my US life, there’s no place for tears; but here there seemed a place for all emotions, especially sadness. After several weeks in the city, I came to feel the rich minor key melodies that provide its undertone as the music of my soul —mirroring my own moods and endeavors: moments of grandeur and beauty, even momentary perfection, but with an underlying sadness forged by constant struggle against subjugating Philistines.

Business life at the higher levels exerts constant pressure to be positive, optimistic, and upbeat. Perhaps this pressure helps make “can-do” employees, but it inhibits both intellectual integrity and authentic emotion. In Argentina, I could acknowledge life more honestly and feel a spectrum of emotions—especially the somber hues that motivate the struggle for harmony, beauty, love, and the *abrazo*, which is all the more

heartfelt as a defense against the ignorance and brutality of the world.

As I packed, I considered extending my stay. I didn't absolutely have to return the next day, but I'd been gone a month, and had already delayed my return a few days. I was faced with two loves: in the here and now, a city opening me up to new possibilities of beauty, passion, grace and "connection"; in the past and future, a family I love intensely along with the life that, for all its inadequacies, is the one that I have struggled to build. You cannot have both—at least not at the same time. That's the sadness of love.

Ironically, I left BsAs because of what I loved about it: the emotional connection it opened up. Strong as the intellectual and hedonic appeal of staying was, it could not match the emotional pull of "mi familia querida." I wanted to hug my wife, my kids, my dog and cat; I wanted to return to embrace all that was querida en mi vida and to embrace even my challenges.

But transcendently, I extended my stay indefinitely. In BsAs I found physical connectedness, and came to re-appreciate how a warm embrace and a woman's body can thaw and soften a life that's otherwise cold and hard. Likewise, I found emotional connectedness, and the surprising discovery that acknowledging sadness does not preclude happiness; rather, you can take the two together, pour in heart and soul, and wring every ounce of pleasure until the sun comes up. Perhaps most surprising of all, I found a spiritual connectedness – across blood, culture, space, time, and even socio-economic status – to the 19th century homesick prisoners and laborers on the BsAs ports, in whose footsteps I so gratefully follow every chance I get.

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