For many years we have facilitated groups and assisted individuals as they travel through the challenges of going from an initial reunion with lost kin to establishing a full and meaningful reconnection. Often, the reunion is experienced as positive and one looks forward to a growing and sustained relationship, only to find that with time the early closeness gives way to a less than enthusiastic set of interactions. Our purpose here is to describe some of the strategies that get reconnections into difficulty and the means for getting them back on track.

Reunion and reconnection relationships are like a dance. In other words, it takes two to tango!! What each partner does affects the other person. To be successful, the partners must coordinate their moves. If this does not happen, several ineffective dances result. The first is the conflict conga: One or both parties will step on each other’s toes. This typically happens when someone insists that the other follow one’s lead. The disruption rumba results when one or both parties will choose to no longer dance. The two-step shuffle occurs when both parties continue to dance, but one will be doing so with less enthusiasm and different steps than the other. Finally when one or both partners are not paying attention to the dance but are distracted elsewhere, this is dancing in the dark.

To change the relationship, one or both parties must change the way they dance together. This is never easy, particularly because we have a tendency when things go wrong to point a finger at the other person. We insist that if only the other person were a better dance partner, all would be well. What we forget is that when we point an accusatory finger at our dance partner, three more fingers are pointing back at us. Successful dancing in a growing reconnection requires that both partners readjust their dance steps. Only by doing so will each experience the dance in a positive light.

While it would make sense for both dance partners to work in harmony to coordinate their dance steps, this is rarely the case. Typically, one person wants to see change. The other wants to maintain the steps that have been used in the past. The good news is that this does not necessarily mean that the dance must come to a conclusion, as a change by either dance partner requires an adjusting response from the other one. However, to be a dance partner who can change the dance, it is necessary to have the self-awareness of how one dances with a partner and the willingness to change how one goes about dancing. Bottom line: if you will change the way you dance, so must your partner.

Self-defeating dance moves and their correction: So, what can we do to change the dance? Below we list some of the unsuccessful dance moves and possible means of getting the dance back on track.

The solution is the problem: What we try and do, that is, our solution for fixing the problem, becomes the real problem that maintains the situation. The most typical thing we do when the dance does not go well is to do more of whatever we have been doing in the past. We tend to increase the frequency or intensity of the strategy we have been using all along. This exacerbates the situation, usually leading to one of the parties leaving the dance floor.

Here are some examples. If one of the dance partners does not want others to know that she has been dancing with lost kin, she may insist that they restrict the size of their dance floor so that secrecy about the reconnection will be preserved. This is the secret samba. By building a wall of secrecy around the dance partners, there is no room for them to learn new and more intimate steps. What is
the result? The relationship doesn’t grow stronger. Their dance is not sustained by those who surround them and are systemically linked to them. Thus, the dance begins to stultify.

Another example is dancing cheek to cheek. We insist that the partner come very close. We enthusiastically ask them to join us and our family as if all of us have always danced together. We insist that they move forward without reservation as there is no need to hold back. However, for some dance partners, rapid and intense emotional connection is not something that they might feel comfortable with in any relationship, let alone a reconnection following a reunion. These partners need time and space to try out their dance moves. Thus, if more of the same leads to disengaging, then less of the same may lead to a lessening of conflict, thus leaving more space for the dance partner to move forward.

To dance well we must be aware of what our partner is looking for in the newly evolving relationship. For example, if less of the same leads to uncomfortable dancing, perhaps the partner is now looking for more of the same. Trial and error will usually sort out which strategy is more effective.

Sometimes we forget that when we are trying to establish a positive and lasting reconnection with kin, we are maneuvering on a crowded dance floor. We ignore the fact that our dance partner may have difficulty dancing not just with us but also with multiple partners in his life. Clearly, it is difficult to dance with two partners at the same time. Patience is needed to join the dance only when it is our turn. At times, our partner must dance with someone other than ourselves, for example, with a spouse, business associates, and children.

Think of a reconnection dance between a first parent and an adult adoptee. All is going well. Then the adoptee gives birth to a child, and the adoptive parent is angry that the adoptee is spending time with the first parent. To decrease the conflict with the adoptive parent, the adoptee may withdraw from the dance with the first parent while sorting out her relationship with her spouse and the adoptive parent. In this example, it is not that the first parent is a bad dance partner. It is just that the adoptee can only dance with one dance partner at a time. With time, patience and understanding, the reconnection dance can be resumed. In this example, the first parent will be a more welcomed dance partner if she can empathize with the adoptee struggling to respond to her full dance card.

Another way of improving the reconnection dance is to change the name of the dance. This is referred to as reframing. How we think about and name our dance affects how well we dance together. For example, if we choose to describe a reconnection in binary terms, that is that it is either successful or unsuccessful, then any deviation from successful means that the relationship is unsuccessful. Instead, if we break down our relationship into the many different categories of dance, e.g., friendship, parent-child relationship, social relationship, family inclusion, and emotional sharing, then we can say we are able to do some things better than others. This leaves a more positive expectation for continued growth.

One cannot go from no relationship to a fully formed and coordinated one. It takes time to know one’s dance partner and his or her idiosyncrasies. Don’t reserve “success” only for the end point.

Furthermore, consider the way you label your dance partner’s emotions. The same display can be labeled as either fear or anger, grief or disinterest, excitement or anxiety. How we label another’s response will in turn affect how we will respond in kind. Changing the label changes what dance we bring to the floor. It, in turn, will change the way our partner will be able to dance with us.
Now if doing more or less of the same or reframing a dance doesn’t work, it is time to consider what we call the Monty Python Rule of Social Interaction: “And now for something completely different.” Stop dancing in the same way and do something you have never tried before. Make a qualitative, not just a quantitative change, in your dance step.

**Stop dancing, start courting:** For example, stop asking when you can see the person and start sending cards that simply say it is a beautiful day and you were thinking warm thoughts about your dance partner.

**Change your dance costume:** Dancing, especially with a stranger, can sometimes be awkward. Try dancing in the personae of someone who would feel less awkward with this partner. For example, don’t dance as mom when you can dance as an older friend. You can always switch costumes when the dance feels more comfortable.

**Start dancing with one of your partner’s other dance partners.** Sometimes, one’s partner is unable to dance at the moment. This may happen for many reasons from emotional stability or grief to practical concerns like time or monetary concerns. Consider, therefore, changing dance partners. When you find it impossible to get something going with someone, see if there is anyone else you might dance with, for example, a sibling, cousin, or grandparent. Because all dance partners are linked together, by changing partners, you will have an indirect influence on the person who refuses to dance with you. If one is trying to dance with mom, but she is reluctant, work on the dance with a brother or sister. This will influence the future development of a positive dance with mom.

Do not forget to **dance with your other dance partners whom you danced with before the reunion and reconnection.** It is important to stay in step with your partner, your children, and your friends. They can help you through the rough patches with your reconnection dance partners.

**Find more opportunities to go dancing.** Geographic distance, and a lack of shared experiences are the two important predictors of problems with reconnection. Spending time together, sharing common experiences, enjoying each other’s company, getting to see each other in real, everyday situations – all these are necessary. If you live too far away, take a trip together. The paradox is that when you do not try and do the reconnection dance but instead focus on the day-to-day dance, the reconnection will grow closer.

And finally, work with a good **Dance Instructor** and others with dancing experience such as support group members. Dancing without support will increase the challenge of dancing successfully with others. A person with much experience such as an adoption savvy therapist or support group leader can help to sort out your faulty reconnection moves. Watching others go through their dance routines will also give you ideas for what moves you can try. Remember, reunions are simply a moment in time. Reconnections are all about how we dance after the reunion. What we do affects our partner just as our partner’s steps affect us. Pay attention to how you dance. Watch your partner to learn ways to coordinate the dance and when you stumble, find ways of changing the dance.

Published in Adoption Circles Issue #73 Spring 2015 by Forget Me Not Family Society.
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