

101 Ways to Say No to Contact Improvisation: Boundaries and Trust

by *Martin Keogh*

*...it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give—yes or no, or maybe—
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.*

—*William Stafford*

Contact Improvisation is a dance that invites our entire body and being to be present and available. To dance this form, we need to build a capacity for trust with ourselves and our partners. We nurture or harm that trust by our ability or inability to set and respect boundaries.

This process is ongoing for me even after more than two decades of dancing. At different points along the way, I've grappled with many questions: How do you let people know you are not warmed up and not yet ready to dance, or that you want to end a dance? How do you set boundaries when you have a physical limitation or are working with an injury, or are dancing with an insensitive partner? What do you do when your lover is having a sensual dance with someone else and you are feeling threatened? How do you intercede when a group of musicians are all looking at each other and having a great time, but seem to have forgotten the dancers they are playing for? How do you communicate to a duet that their loud, emotional catharsis is overpowering and interfering with the other dances in the room? How are these boundaries negotiated and communicated?

A student came into a workshop of mine with a flaming rash all over his body. When I said, "Find a partner," everyone fled from where he was standing, so I ended up working with him. I was uncomfortable that his rash might be infectious, so I asked him directly, "Is this contagious?" He said he had an allergic reaction called mastocytosis that releases massive amounts of histamines, which cause the skin discoloration. He spoke of his long struggle with it and said it was definitely not transmittable. I was relieved, and as I had hoped, the class eavesdropped and he had little trouble finding partners after that.

A friend and dance partner came to the Philadelphia Contact Festival where I was teaching and performing. We were looking forward to dancing together, and at the closing jam we finally had our chance. As we were dancing, different people approached us to join the dance. A couple of times we were able to communicate physically that we were not done yet. When one person tried to join I said, "We have had a date for this duet for six weeks and we still need some more time together." I checked in with that person later and she said my "no" was communicated clearly and gracefully.

I've found there are instances in which the community at large comes together to help individuals set boundaries. In the mid-1980s, many women who danced at the weekly Contact jam in Berkeley, California, complained about a particular man who regularly came to dance. I will call him Roland. They said dancing with him was unpleasant because of his lack of awareness of boundaries. It was difficult for the women to describe the behavior they didn't like; they could only call it a "feeling." One said, "Dancing with Roland is like dancing with an overly enthusiastic puppy, the one that's trying to hump your shins." The general feeling was that he was "getting off" on the dance, and stealing something that was not being offered by his partners.

It was not hard to notice that almost every time a young woman came through the door of the jam for the first time, from wherever he was in the room, Roland's head would pop up. Within minutes

he would be at her side, offering to enlighten her on the finer points of Contact Improvisation. Many of those women were never seen at the jam again.

Though many women could talk about Roland, it turned out that most had not said anything directly to him. It was confusing for them to get this cloying feeling from this man and yet have so little specific behavior to talk to him about. I remember one woman saying, "Talking to him would be like complaining about the weather; it just wouldn't do any good."

Roland would regularly attend the Northern California Contact Jam, a five-day residential jam at Harbin Hot Springs. It was there that I learned a lesson about communicating boundaries from one of the organizers, Sue Stuart. One evening I was present as two women sat down with Sue to lament about Roland. They wanted her to do something about him.

Sue asked, "Have you said anything to Roland?" When she heard that they hadn't, she asked, "What would you like to say to him?" Both articulated what they would say. One said, "I feel you are getting off sexually while dancing with me, and I don't want to dance with you or be approached by you until you get your sexual desires under control." From saying it aloud, the woman was able to take Roland aside and talk to him. The other didn't feel she could confront him directly until Sue offered to accompany her and be at her side.

I was impressed that Sue responded to these women by giving them the means to take care of the predicament themselves rather than letting them give their power to her, the person in the position of authority. Roland apologized and said he would try to change his behavior.

A few months later it was clear that Roland had changed his dancing with the women who were regulars in the community. But his radar would still light up when new women came into the weekly jam. A few of the men who noticed this, including myself, took him aside and with good humor told him what we perceived. We said we felt he was hurting the community and needed to stop this conduct or stop coming to the jams. While we approached him with some levity, he understood the gravity of the situation by the fact that so many of us had made the same observation. Roland did change and now, over a decade later, still regularly dances in a welcoming community.

In this instance it worked out well for both Roland and the group. However, I've heard of similar situations with both men and women that weren't so successful; the individuals involved were finally asked not to return.

From my ongoing inquiry into what's needed in order to cultivate clear boundaries, I've developed a workshop called "101 Ways to Say No to Contact Improvisation." The premise of the workshop is that until a person has the confidence and ability to say no to something, he or she won't have the trust and capacity to fully say yes to it. In the workshop, we explore physical and verbal skills to say no to dances, to touch, to being lifted, to weight exchange, to momentum, to manipulation.

For example, when someone reaches to grab me and lift me up and I don't want to be lifted, I can drop my weight and move my center away from my partner's center. I become too heavy to lift. I have clearly said no. With this knowledge of how to say no, I can extrapolate the opposite; when I want to say yes and take the opportunity to fly up, I already have the sense of how to become light by raising my center and organizing it over my partner's core.

The same is true with touch. I need the self-trust and ability to remove someone's hand (either physically or verbally) when I don't want his or her physical contact or manipulation. With confidence in my ability to set the boundary, I can choose the opposite and open to the touch.

Robert Bly offers us an image in *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*. It is that we have a door in our psyche. As children, the doorknob is on the outside and people come and go as they please. As we mature into adults, we learn to transfer the doorknob to the inside and choose when and for whom to open and close the door. If we know we can close the door, we are freer to open it and invite people in.

Some people come to this dance form and it's a challenge for them to feel and connect to the sensations in their body. This can be a result of people having forced their way through their door early on in life. For those whose boundaries were splintered as children, it can be as if they've created a shield or protective armor that keeps them from making full contact with their bodies and with the world. Here it becomes especially important for them to develop boundary-setting skills, to know they have the doorknob on the inside. With the ability to express limits, they can begin to relinquish the protective layers and invite more possibilities into the Contact dance and, furthermore, into their lives.

In Contact Improvisation there is a basic principle that each person takes responsibility for him- or herself. I am the only person who can be inside my body, so I need to keep a part of me awake—the part that can sense and communicate (physically or verbally) my needs, limits, and desires. I need to keep myself safe and make sure I don't hurt others. Adhering to a practice of this principle is one way to move the doorknob to the inside.

During the 101 Ways to Say No... workshop, I teach another safety skill, this one for learning to communicate quickly in high-energy situations. We learn to shout one-syllable words that demand immediate attention: "Stop!" "Back!" "Wait!" (I don't use "No!" anymore because it's a word rich in nuance and, as anybody with children knows, a word prone to be tested.) We also practice exclaiming words that specify a part of the body that is in pain or about to be: "Knee!" "Ankle!" "Neck!" It's rare that this skill will be used, but knowing that the words are in place reassures the psyche and allows us to open the door to more athletic, acrobatic, and disorienting dances.

As I developed material for the workshop, I wanted an exercise that would clearly demonstrate that a person's ability to say no would create a greater capacity for yes. Out of this investigation came an exercise called "Two Rivers."

I don't introduce this exercise until the group has some history working together. One person, the receiver, lies on his or her back. Two others, the "two rivers," give the receiver slow flowing caresses directed by arm signals from the receiver. When the receiver crosses her arms over her torso, it means "Don't touch me at all." When she rests her arms on the floor beside her body, it means "Touch me nicely, like you would if we were in a public place." When she places her arms on the floor over her head, it means "You can touch me anywhere and everywhere, no-holds-barred." The receiver can change the position of his or her arms at any time.

The touch might have a calming tone, a nurturing tone, a sensual tone, or a sexual tone, but the receiver is always in control of what he or she is receiving. The receiver opens and closes the locks on the rivers. The two rivers are instructed that no matter where the receiver's arms are, they should touch only to their own level of comfort.

It is clear to participants that if this exercise didn't contain the full stop "No, don't touch me anywhere," it wouldn't be able to offer the full yes to touch everywhere. With the boundary available and visible, people are able to ask for more than if the boundary wasn't in place. With all

the implicit consensuality in our dance form, practicing an explicit consensuality allows for more comfort with the tacit agreements we make in each moment as we dance.

After a workshop that included the Two Rivers exercise, one student emailed me this quote from William Blake:

“You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough. The lust of the goat is the bounty of God. The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.”

Steve Paxton has been known to say, “Contact Improvisation is not a gland game,” meaning, in part, that it’s not a sexual dance. I often hear people say, “I love this dance form because it’s a non-sexual way to be physical and affectionate and playful with people.”

This is not true for me. There is a way in which I am always aware of myself as a sexual being. Every breath I take is sexual. There is a rapture I feel when I’m dancing with women and a pride I feel in being a man when I dance with men. I can’t amputate that part of myself.

I certainly don’t want my partners to feel I’m using the dance to “get off.” Sometimes I dance with the image that my partner and I are in a one-hundred-year courtship. We are not trying to get anywhere. Without closing down any part of myself, I can dance with that savory side of me awake. Authentic, spontaneous Contact entails surrendering the need to gain or profit from the exchange. In this surrender, a person can dance this form and keep their sexuality alive.

Whenever we dance, there is a testing of what is consensual. Will you accept my weight? Can we go fast? Can we go very, very slow? Occasionally I meet someone and we consensually bring an erotic or seductive energy to the dance. We move in concentrically and test what is welcome for both of us. There is a safety in the exchange because we are chaperoned by our sense of appropriate behavior in the jam environment.

When I’m in the backyard of our home watching our children play with friends, their improvised games are a constant setting and testing of boundaries. Sometimes in their play they are famous paleontologists digging up the biggest dinosaur ever discovered. Sometimes they are empire builders—running around with their swords and cardboard shields, crawling on their bellies into forts under the hedges—making and breaking and negotiating the rules as they go. Sometimes it’s a physical cue or a single word; sometimes the play stops completely as they work out the rules of the game. They are constantly working to make the flow of attention and power be fair and balanced. It looks similar to what we do in our dance community.

There has been an ongoing negotiating of boundaries over the years at the Northern California Contact Jam. The group wrangles over how much structure to have, how much emotional catharsis or music is desirable in the jam space. Over the course of the first ten or so jams, as we established our spoken and unspoken agreements, we had many overt instances of crossing lines into argument. We learned over time that simply listening to one another was what was needed in order to find a balance between opposing desires. There was little need for executive decisions. Being in the conflict and hearing each person speak allowed for solutions to evolve naturally.

I noticed that the jams with the most conflict also seemed to have the most sincere and sometimes tearful gratitude at the end. When we were fully involved in the testing and establishing of boundaries, there was a sense of learning, of creating relationships, of being in an alive group that left us with a profound sense of appreciation for one another.

Being in a group of dancers and doing this ongoing work of clarifying boundaries is like inhabiting

a rock tumbler—those containers you fill with stones and spin for days so that the stones polish one another. As we learn to sense and express our boundaries, we tumble and rub and hit against others both physically and figuratively. It can hurt as our sharp edges get rounded, but over time we become polished, slowly revealing the precious gems we carry. Through this process we begin to treasure the living entity called “community” that helps us develop a greater capacity for yes—in our dance and in our lives.