

When the appearances and superficial aspects of what is considered “the dance” so far outweigh anything else, it makes a mockery of our lives.

What do these three pictures have in common?



I SAW A MOVIE ONCE ABOUT AN INCREDIBLY talented baseball pitcher who lacked finesse in every way. He was trying to get to the major leagues from a minor league team, and the metaphor used for advancing was “going to the show.” The movie came out around the time I was working in my first and only corporate job, and I had definitely gone to the big leagues—“the show,” “the big dance.” My raw talents for the position I was hired for were strong; more than seven hundred other people applied for my job. I was like the minor league pitcher in the movie in that all the skills were there in native form, and the person who hired me saw them. The problem was that I could put on a really awesome performance for an interview—throw a ninety-plus-mile-per-hour fastball when the situation called for it—I couldn’t give my boss what she wanted on a regular basis when it came to the finer points. I knew my job. Technically, I did my job really well. I worked hard, but I wasn’t polished when it came to the rituals of the corporate dance floor.

The complication for me was that I not only didn’t care about all the finer—in my view, superficial—points that would have enabled me to advance; I found them repulsive. I knew the dance was about climbing the company ladder, and I knew what the moves were: making the right kinds of jokes at the right time with the right people; being just sexual enough for an office environment to give people a

tingle without crossing the line; staying late when there wasn’t any reason to; going out to dinner with people I couldn’t stand; laughing at jokes that weren’t funny; and joining the kinds of cliques that made the identified outcasts feel as miserable as possible.

I hated cliques in high school, and this corporate environment felt like an imprisonment in everything I couldn’t wait to escape over a decade before. In my midwestern high school, there were a few important indicators of who you were and where you were headed: going to the dances and watching the popular kids be crowned this or that; being seen with a date who was considered a prize among the junior or senior class; driving someone home after the prom—the crème de la crème of all dances—and knowing what you were expected to do as a rite of passage.

Like the corporate environment I entered in my early thirties, my high school environment was one where people assumed I had all the right moves. Though my clothes were only copies of the most expensive “in” brands and styles—we didn’t have enough money to pay for the “real” things—I was always nice looking; I had a ticket to the land of the cool. I was smart, too, the editor-in-chief of my high school paper. That gave me status at a suburban high school that in itself was considered to be above the city high schools—white flight had ensured that—but it was even considered above many

of the other suburban high schools that were in areas still slightly contaminated by proximity to my small midwestern city's blue collarness. In my city, you were defined by how you dressed, where you lived, and especially where you went to high school.

The thing was, though, I never really belonged at "the dance." I had snuck into the suburbs from my blue-collar neighborhood by accident when I decided to leave my home in the city with my mother and go live with my father and his new (fourth) wife. I had driven through the suburbs for many years with my mother—especially at Christmas—oohing and aahing at the beautiful ranch and two-story homes in the suburbs all lit up. Then we would return to our tiny bungalow in our working-class city neighborhood behind the loading dock of the neighborhood supermarket. When my chance came to actually live like the people I and my mother only enjoyed dreaming about in a Hollywood kind of way, I couldn't resist.

My being, though, didn't fit in the suburbs. I had heard too many stories about how my grandmother bought her first washing machine when Franklin D. Roosevelt made employers compensate workers taken advantage of during the Great Depression. My grandfather had been one of those who, under threat of being fired, worked innumerable "overtimes" for no pay. FDR, my grandmother told me many times, found some way to make employers account for that exploitation. So, she received a check as a result of the settlement between the Depression employers and the government,

and voila—a washing machine! I believed in unions, the way my family always voted, and the programs that enabled my family to have dignity.

My belief system—already strong by the time I got to high school—didn't make me good material for the way "the dance" was to be done in suburban or corporate America. I had, for one thing, a way of pronouncing words that I inherited from my mother's deep southern Illinois roots. This way of pronouncing words—particularly changing "or" to "ar" in words like "forty" and "fork"—immediately got me unexpected and unwanted laughs, and there was an instant realization of the part of town I was from, the part where women like my mother came as girls from impoverished farms in southern Illinois to work in the kitchens of the well-to-do during World War II. An elderly man who remembered that era in my small midwestern city told me that the wealthy guys then used to refer to these country girls as "kitchen take."

My looks and my brains made it seem I was "dance material" from the time I entered high school. I tried to advance that prospect by fleeing a blue-collar city neighborhood when my father got his ticket to the suburban home of a wealthy widow. But there was always the tension for me of not really believing in anything people around me did in terms of what mattered—who the president should be, the direction our country should take with its social programs and international policy. I couldn't fathom why an up and coming high school classmate in my new suburban high school

gave his father a subscription to a conservative newspaper focused on finance for Christmas. That classmate belonged and ruled at all the dances in high school, and I've since learned that he went on "dancing" in all the ways this country rewards. I remember the evening before the prom when he mused to himself about whether he should do what was pretty much the suburban norm with his date after the prom. But I didn't even know that was a rite of passage in suburban America. In my old city neighborhood, if you were going to do that in high school, you had probably already gotten more than halfway there in the balcony of the local movie theater by eighth grade—and you were considered sleazy. I was learning that the dance in suburbia redefined what was moral or sleazy or upwardly mobile—and *that* was the definition that mattered.

The same approach mattered in corporate America, I came to believe, and my problem was that I knew the moves I was expected to make, having learned them in my suburban high school, but the moves weren't me. My blue-collar values and beliefs about what made work honorable didn't give me the right moves for the dance I was in, and even though, out of frustration, I eventually tried to fake them, I couldn't do them. Politically, I had two left feet, and the stakes were bigger than they were in high school. Now it was about money, financial security, health insurance, and all the other "benefits." But just as in high school, it quickly became apparent that I really wasn't meant to be there, I didn't fit in, and I would never learn to accept the superficial rituals that

went with success. It didn't matter how well I did what I was hired to do, I couldn't do the dance and shouldn't have been there in the first place. And, just as in high school, there were punishments and humiliations for not participating in the corporate dance.

I stood it as long as I could. When I left, I went to a job in a place where the moves made sense to me. My new job was in a city filled with lots of different people—socioeconomically, educationally, racially. It was a job where really big things happened and really small things had no room and no time and no place to define anyone. The dance there was one that made sense to me, and I instinctively knew the steps: tolerance, compassion, laughing with and not at people, individuality, loyalty, hard work, and honesty. Sure, politics were there as they are everywhere, but they weren't vital. What was vital was doing your job and doing it really well, and I knew how to do that.

I believe that in every culture, time, and country, in every neighborhood, school, and job there are choreographed steps one must follow to be regarded as graceful and elegant. But when the appearances and superficial aspects of what is considered "the dance" so far outweigh anything else, it makes a mockery of our lives. When that happened to me, it was time to find a place where the most critical thing was not being the smoothest or most polished performer but rather creating and providing something of lasting human value. That's what matters—no matter how many left feet one has. ❖