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Relative Motion

Part Two

By Jae Gruenke

If physicists can be believed, matter is a set of dynamic spatial relationships. Atoms are defined by movement and interaction, composed of electrons relating to each other and to protons and neutrons by orbiting. Of course, you can't feel this constant movement on the atomic level – or maybe we all can, but can't notice it because we've never felt anything else. In any case, it's a beautiful metaphor for more noticeable features of our lives. In my last column we looked at how we organize ourselves to move in an environment that is also moving. This month we will take the atom as our guiding image, considering tennis and swing dancing as dynamic relationships between people that restructure the space they move through.

Just being made up of atoms doesn't necessarily make you good at moving relative to something else that is moving. You have to practice anything to get good at it, as I can attest after just one tennis lesson and a whole bunch of swing dancing classes. As always, the rewards of stretching your limits to learn something new are sweet. Along with the natural joys of recreation, you will improve a crucial human skill – the ability to adapt to new situations.

But first, let's consider a hallmark of New York living. The constant, swirling motion of city life is the particular delight of many who live here. No point, whether concrete or abstract, seems fixed, but neither are city dynamics random. So we navigate by understanding the systems of movement relationships we encounter, orienting ourselves to their logic like electrons circling the atom's heart. A classic example is riding the subway, where we organize our movements relative to the train's so we're ready to arrive at the station we wish. Paying close attention, you can mine the way you exit a subway car for tools to carry with you into less familiar settings.

ARRIVING

The next time you ride the subway, notice how you decide when to stand up and exit the car. How do you know when to put your book back in your bag and reach down for your umbrella? Probably you'll find that it's not any single factor that determines this – you simply feel it's time to go. And unless you habitually stand in the doorway of the car, you probably have pretty good confidence in your ability to negotiate your exit. Let's look at that confidence.

Over the course of a number of subway trips, navigate by different senses. First try your hearing - if you're feeling bold, do it with your eyes closed. Do you listen for the change in sound when the station platform appears alongside the train? Do you listen for the moment the brakes begin to squeal? Do you listen for a change in the rhythmic noise of the train as it slows down?

Try it again only on the basis of what you feel in the movement of the train. Do you feel for the moment of deceleration? How slowly does the train have to be moving? Do you wait for a certain steadiness of the car that lets you know you'll be able to stand up without danger? Do you wait for that final jolt of brakes?

Make your decision next only on the basis of what you see. Do you wait to see the platform? Do you wait until you see the doors open? Do you wait until you can see how to fit yourself into the group of people moving towards the door?

Finally, try approaching the entire project as a whole, but with heightened awareness. The train is hurtling along the track to arrive at its designated point on the platform. At the same time, you move inside it, preparing to arrive at that same point on the platform at the same instant. Everything you see, feel, and hear plays a part. Feel the rhythm of the train speeding along the track, and then feel the change in the rhythm in any of your senses. Feel the moment when your movements begin to integrate with the changing beat: the movements of your hands as you fold your paper, lean forward for your bag, look up for the station sign. Feel the natural moment when you stand and walk – without, as they say, missing a beat – out the open doors.

If the train were suddenly to vanish, becoming invisible like Wonder Woman's jet plane, your small movements of reaching sideways, leaning forward, and taking a few steps across the car would seem an incomprehensible series of airborne zigs and zags through the tunnel, culminating in a perfect arrival on the platform. An observer who wasn't aware of the unseen train would be baffled by the mysterious intentionality of your movements. They wouldn't realize that your movements were organized around the way the train approaches the station.

For years tennis has looked as incomprehensible to me as someone riding an invisible train. Although the ball is very vividly visible, the cues the players respond to were not. My first tennis lesson began to reveal how the movements of tennis are organized around the ball.

THE TENNIS COURT POLKA

I felt pretty good when I was able to return the two balls Don Sylva, tennis pro at the East River tennis courts, tossed experimentally to me. *Thok, thok* – maybe tennis would be easy after all. He crossed back over to my side of the net and demonstrated a looping action with the tennis racket, circling it up and lowering it behind him in preparation, then meeting the ball neatly on an upswing and following through to his opposite shoulder. I tried it and found it had a lovely, fluid logic – easier yet! As I swung at ball after ball, though, I was never quite sure if I was going to hit them until I did. Don saw my uncertainty as clearly as he'd seen my earlier misshapen swing, and began to teach me how to move my body relative to the ball. This took the rest of the lesson and, I'm sure, could take many, many lessons to come.

One of the first things he said was that I should move to the ball in many small steps rather than a few big ones. That was counterintuitive to me, since a couple of long, decisive strides felt calm and in control, while small steps felt frantic and ineffectual. Don explained that small steps allow essential micro adjustments to the ball that are impossible otherwise, and I could see his point. I earnestly tried it, but I felt like a bad actor pretending to polka, jumping spastically around out of time to the music. Still, I seemed to be able to hit the ball okay, so figured it just must take some getting used to.

After I took a couple of strikingly awkward swings, Don pointed out to me that the racket made my reach longer than my bare hand could accomplish, so I would have to be farther away from the ball. It seems obvious to say it now, but a lifetime of moving around without a racket in my hand was misinforming my movements on the tennis court until the difference between tennis and catch was pointed out to me. *Thok* – three nice, relaxed swings followed.

For a while I thought I was doing pretty well, and then Don asked me why I was running to the ball

instead of letting it come to me. I realized that I had been running forward to the net, trying to hit the ball as soon as humanly possible. I tried hanging back for what seemed like much too long and, lo and behold, I hit the ball and felt much more relaxed. I enjoyed that accomplishment for a full 17 seconds as, *thok, thok*, ball after ball sailed well out of bounds, over the fence, and into other peoples' courts. Don beckoned me to meet him at the net.

I knew that I was hitting the ball too far to actually play tennis. Baseball, maybe, but not tennis. It just felt so satisfying to connect with the ball – *thok* is a *great* sound, and the feeling of the ball springing off the racket strings sent a juicy pulse of slingshot power through my bones. Unsympathetic to my misdirected pleasure, Don started working with me at close range.

He tossed balls over the net, and I was to bump them back before they hit the ground. Instead they sailed halfway across the court. No good. He took the racket out of my hand and replaced it with an empty tennis ball can. I was to catch the ball in the can without moving my arm relative to my body. I did my bad polka and missed the ball half the time. It seemed like the balls should all have gone in, but they just didn't.

Don demonstrated. He was cool as a cucumber, taking small, light steps that refined his relationship to the ball, and it sailed into the canister every time. I tried again, copying the feel in his movements, and understood for the first time that taking small dancing steps didn't mean taking *extra* steps. I had similar success. It felt, as every real improvement had, more natural, relaxed, and self-possessed.

For our final drill, Don hit a regular sequence of shots to me: one close to the net, one farther away, and one for me to bump back before it bounced. I felt the tennis court reorganize itself around the nucleus of the ball, growing deep or short depending on the length of the shot and my knowledge of what was to follow. Tennis is a whole new kind of world to me, one in which distance and proximity are stitched together into a new shape every time the ball flies over the net. Even now, as I close my eyes, I see the day-glo yellow orb sailing towards me or away, and I find that I have moved on my imaginary court to meet it without thinking, as though the ball's magnetic power moved me.

ANOTHER KIND OF SWING

The first thing I ever knew about swing dancing was a postcard photo of the Lindy Hop. It showed two dancers airborne above the ballroom floor, held together by a handclasp, looks of ecstasy on their faces. The expressions of real live swing dancers I later saw seemed to bear this out, and that was enough for me. I *had* to learn it.

In the beginner swing dance classes I took at Sandra Cameron Dance Center, the steps initially seemed very square. If you're the woman, you step forward onto your right foot, backward onto your left, and rock-step onto the ball of your right foot and back onto your left. One arm on your partner, one hand in his, you dance side-by-side, as though collaborators on a road that lies in front of you. Stepping together, away from each other, and back again, most beginners involuntarily plot a point in the room that is the center of their partnership, to which they return after each rock-step.

This center breaks down with turning. As the man guides the woman through a simple turn out and back, he discovers that his inclination to step into the imaginary center point will be foiled because he has to keep his feet moving too – he can't just stand still and twirl the woman like a ballet dancer. He directs her with his hands to begin the turn, moves on a path complementary to hers, pauses to rock-step face-to-face with her, and then they both return to their original configuration. When he and his partner improve, they will be able to complete a turn relative to each other without necessarily re-

turning to the same position in the room if the crowded dance floor requires.

Two years after my first swing lesson, a partner leads me out on the hopping dance floor of Jack's Joint in the Theater District. He's dressed in an antique bowling shirt, and the feel of his hand leading me is smooth, strong, and direct. In the split second before we begin to move, he bends his knees and rounds his shoulders towards me. Then we're dancing in a muscular, rocking motion that must, I think, be how Elvis would have done the Lindy. Move follows on move in a seamless, surprising sequence, and the dance floor begins to blur around me as my eye movements calibrate with my turning body to reorient me to him and again to him, effortlessly, as he orients himself to me. Our hands are connected in a sure, elastic touch that acts as gyroscope, reins, speedometer, and high-speed communications line. We exchange a word from time to time.

The movements of the dance swing me alternately alongside my partner and away from him, under his arm or momentarily free altogether. It's impossible to tell where the center point of our movement is, as it shifts before it can be identified. It's the tangible, invisible negotiation of our kinetic forces acting on each other. Like the magnetic North Pole, it orients our world but floats free of the landscape. If we pay attention, our dancing can conform itself even to a crowded hall where the couples around us continually alter the shape of our space. We orbit each other in twin grooves, one carved by the steps we know and the conventions of the dance, the other by the music and our own inventive joy.

FITNESS RESOURCES

TENNIS

If you're interested in playing tennis in the New York area, you have many options. The Department of Parks and Recreation operates a number of tennis courts in each borough, which you can use once you obtain a permit. For a listing of courts and instructions on obtaining permits and court reservations, go to www.nycparks.org and click on Things to Do, or call the information number for your borough:

Bronx (718) 430-1830

Brooklyn (718) 965-8993

Manhattan (212) 360-8131

Queens (718) 263-4121

Staten Island (718) 390-8035

To contact a tennis pro for lessons in the NYC parks, go to the US Tennis Association's Eastern Region website, at www.metrotennis.com (click on USA Tennis 1-2-3), or call (718) 937-8434. The website also contains information about tennis leagues and activities. Don Sylva is listed on this page, or you can call him directly at (718) 882-7506.

The City Parks Foundation runs tennis leagues and activities in the city parks for adults and children, as well as offering free tennis lessons for children during July and August. Go to www.nycparkstennis.org or call (718) 699-4220.

Crosstown Tennis Club, located on 31st St. at Fifth Avenue, is an indoor, air-conditioned club open to the public. Courts can be reserved for \$35-55/hour, 4-person group lessons run \$80-\$100 for four sessions, and private lessons with pros begin at \$65. Call (212) 947-5780 or go to www.crosstowntennis.com.

Midtown Tennis Club, located on Eighth Avenue at 27th St., has both indoor and outdoor courts. Their indoor courts run \$40-70/hour, as well as offering seasonal rates. The outdoor courts cost \$27-40. They also offer group classes for adults and children at \$90 for four lessons. Pros start at \$79/hour. Call (212) 909-8572 or go to www.midtowntennis.com.

Manhattan Plaza Racquet Club, located on W. 43rd St. between 9th and 10th Avenues, is a membership club open on a limited basis to the public. They have outdoor courts May through September, and indoor the rest of the year. They offer private lessons with pros, clinics, club leagues, and many other programs. Call (212) 594-0554.

Of course, there are many clubs and courts in addition to these three. New York Sports Online has a complete 5-borough listing of tennis courts and clubs, both public and private, as well as league information and instructions on obtaining a NYC Parks tennis permit. Go to www.nysol.com.

SWING DANCING

Swing dancing options are also multitudinous. Most studios offer a series of four weekly 1-hour classes, as well as practice parties one or more evenings per week. You don't need a partner to take a class or go to a party; classes rotate and so do social scenes. A brief listing of prominent studios follows, but there are many more.

Dance Manhattan, located on w. 19th St., offers four-week series for all levels of students at \$65. If you take more than one class at a time, there is a discount. They also offer a swing dance crash course one Sunday each month, designed to teach raw beginners the basics in 4.5 hours. Call (212) 807-0802 or go to their website at www.dance-manhattan.com, which also has coupons.

Sandra Cameron is located at 20 Cooper Square through August. On September 4, they move to 199 Lafayette St. between Kenmare and Broome. Their 4-class series is \$70, they offer 3 practice parties per week, and their schedule is extensive. Call (212) 674-0505 or go to www.sandracameron.com.

Dance New York, located on W. 54th St., offers a 4-week series for \$70. They also offer a 1-hour sampler class, designed to introduce newcomers to several dances, followed by a 30-minute private lesson for \$20. Call (212) 246-5797 or go to www.dancenewyork.com.

Dancesport, located on Broadway at 60th St., offers a 4-week series for \$80, with a volume discount available. Call (212) 307-1111 or go to www.dancesport.com.

For a calendar of swing dance events at clubs, schools, dance halls, and parks around the city, go to www.nyswingdance.com. Their site also offers related information, including swing dance poetry. For information about swing dancing in Central Park, go to www.centralpark-swings.com or call (212) 358-3858. For an excellent current listing of swing dance resources in New York, go to www.nycdc.com, or to www.yehoodi.com.