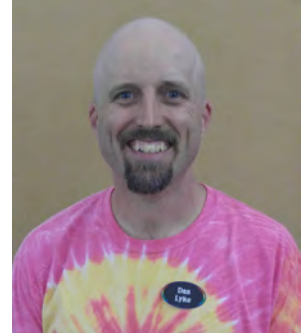


MWSD Has a Straight Square Dancer Problem

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Modern Western Square Dancing has a straight square dancer problem.

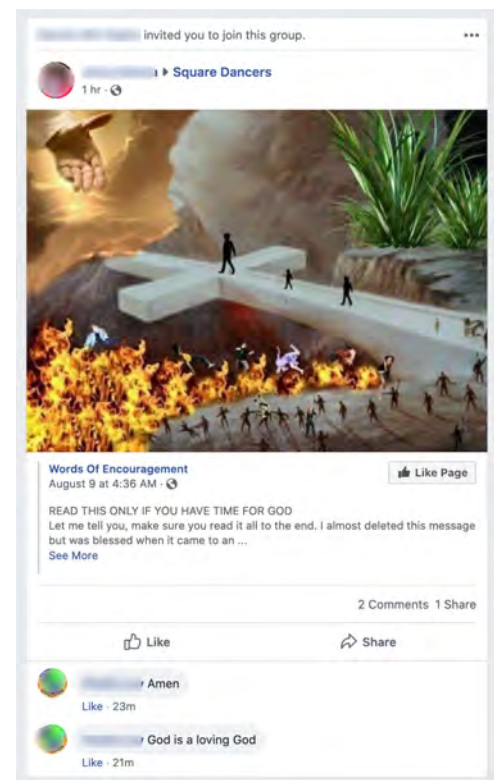
Yes, in practice I'm vanilla, heterosexual, and monogamous, so maybe #NotAllStraightSquareDancers, or maybe I'm part of the problem, but please hear me out.



Square dancing is a framework on which to hang a community. Sure, there are things inherent to the activity that appeal, but it's the fact that we're doing those things in a group that makes it attractive. At some point we start to look beyond the activity and to the people we're hanging out with, and ask "are these the sort of people we want to socialize with outside of the dancing?" And if the answer is "no", I think most of us will go find other things to do with our evenings.

In 2012, my wife dragged me into square dancing with the Redwood Rainbows, and it was fun. In the spring of 2013 while vacationing in Albuquerque, we danced with the Wilde Bunch, and discovered that our community extended further. Then we went to the Capital City Squares fly-in, Stumptown Stomp, and were hooked. We quickly booked the next several months of weekends at various different square dancing events, and as summer rolled on we saw that, even in the San Francisco Bay area, there was a tremendous split in square dancing. There were definitely two distinct cultures, and we definitely looked at which branch we were committing to when we looked at driving 2 hours to a dance.

Sometimes it was obvious red flags. One local straight club may still have the habitual drunk that, when we and a bunch of friends went to a dance at, was somewhere between miming violence and committing it when people suggested maybe dancing on a side that didn't match their gender assigned at birth. Everybody I know who dances at the club has said "yes, he's a problem", but there he was, at that dance. As much as we enjoyed some of the people at that club, it was clear that we had a certain straight privilege, and we no longer felt comfortable



asking our square dancing friends from our home (gay) club to come to a dance with us at that straight club.

Sometimes it was less obvious, and personal preference about who we do and don't get along with can be just that, personal preference, but in general we found that we'd have way more fun at a gay club than a straight club, and we definitely thought about what the cultural mix of a dance was going to be before we went to one.

I've been involved in "social media" and online discussions for long enough that sociology grad students interview me about what life was like before "blog" was a word, so obviously I took this new passion to Facebook, started joining various forums, accepting "friend" requests from others interested in square dancing.

Shortly after my first caller school, a fellow newbie caller asked me what I thought about the ethics of buying square dance music from a prominent square dance music producer. I forget what part of casual racism or sexism or homophobia or other distasteful thing was showing up on that music producer's Facebook page, but after much soul searching, we agreed that the music was, in fact, pretty good, and that we do better by engaging and trying to change minds than by isolating ourselves.

But those impressions were on personal pages, and we all have friends who we avoid specific topics with. The problem was when these sorts of attitudes and impressions were making their way into the square dance specific groups.

Then COVID-19 hit. Suddenly my direct messages filled up with:

Google has removed and censored this video. Like having Google tell you what you can and cannot watch?"

...and the like. I started blocking people and leaving groups.

Then the Black Lives Matter protests started, and frankly I'm not sure that there's anything left to salvage from the smoking ruins of reputation that straight square dancing has brought us.



As I started to write this, there was an active thread in a Facebook group for Square Dance Callers asking about a gender neutral replacement for the “right-hand lady/left-hand man” relationship.

The vast majority of the comments were from people complaining about “PC culture”, and saying “OMG leave it alone”.

I haven’t yet seen the phrase “snowflake” come up yet, but it’s clear that there are plenty of square dance callers (and dancers who subscribe to caller groups out of some sort of misguided masochism) who will die on the hill of a clumsy asymmetric term for a common relationship in order to preserve some sort of gendered tradition, obstructing any attempt by newer callers to evolve terminology to describe choreography situations more cleanly and easily.

One commenter’s lone contribution to the discussion is to suggest that “Being PC will drive dancers away.” I suggest exactly the opposite: ignoring opportunities to evolve the activity and fostering a culture that’s full of micro-aggressions and prejudices is making it difficult to recruit new dancers.

Of course, that discussion eventually dropped into re-hashing “Half-Breed Thru”.

As I continued to let this ruminate, as the protests were raging in Portland, someone posted logos for T-shirts or something with the phrase **“Make Square Dancing Great Again”**.

Some of the direct messages containing conspiracy theory absurdities came from people prominent in the “Social Square Dancing”(“SSD”) movement.

Therefore, it surprised me not at all to see—as we entered the third wave of infection in November 2020, in a 14 day period where Wisconsin added 74,330 cases—a post glorifying a Social Square Dancing event held indoors, without masks, in Rubicon, Wisconsin.



And then, of course, there's the proselytizing.

I've left so many square dancing groups because if I wanted to see that much more religion on my life I'd follow all the churches in my county. Except that I live in Northern California, so the churches aren't quite as "in your face" as these groups.

It would be easy to just call this a simple left-right disagreement, but I've got friends across the political spectrum. Heck, when I was in my 20s, I was rightly called a "right-wing asshole" by my father. I understand how people come to various different political positions.

This is *different*.

This is conspiracy theory and QAnon and similar videos in my private messages. This is the public face of square dancing being people who are unaware of how the broader world perceives them, or who are so far down the rabbit hole that they just don't care.

I don't claim to be "woke", nor, in the vernacular of the '90s, have I "seen the fnords"³, I'm a straight white guy coasting along on my privilege.

However, as a marketing point, "Hey, wanna spend the next half year hanging out with Fox News enthusiasts for two hours every week" is not something that will sell to me. And it sure as heck won't sell to the sorts of people that I want to build my community around.

So I contend that if we're going to have an activity like square dancing we either need to re-brand it as something other than square dancing, or we need to actively distance ourselves from the straight square dancing community.

Back in 2008, 4 years before I even started dancing, there was a large boom in the membership of the Redwood Rainbows. Rich Reel noted in March 2009 issue of The Call Sheet:

"I think the theme in general for this past year is that gay square dancing attendance is level or up only because straight square dancers have discovered us. I believe if we relied only on gay and lesbian

3 From Wikipedia: Coined by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson in the *Illuminatus Trilogy*. In these novels, the interjection "fnord" is given hypnotic power over the unenlightened, and children in grade school are taught to be unable to see the word consciously. For the rest of their lives, every appearance of the word subconsciously generates a feeling of unease and confusion, preventing rational consideration of the text in which it appears.

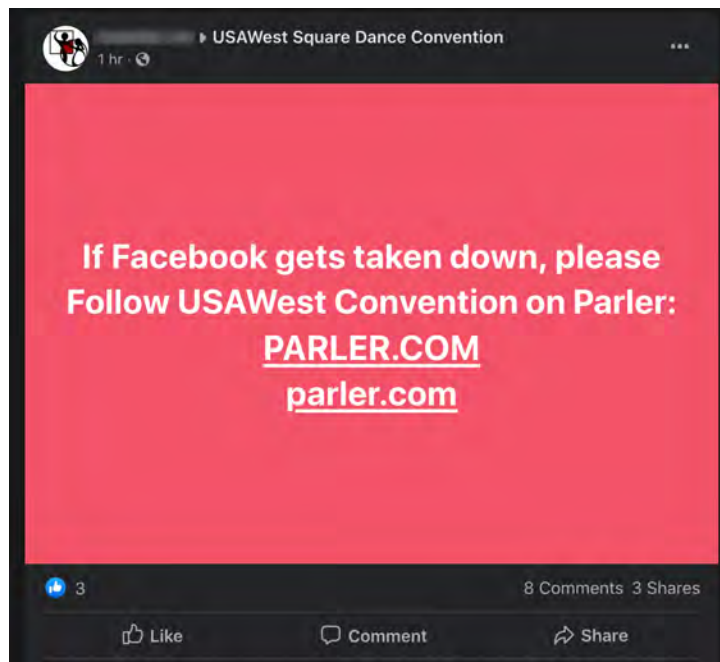


dancers, all area clubs would be down. But we have straight dancers, they love us and they are keeping the square dance spirit very much alive. (We asked for acceptance – well, we’ve got it!) I expect more and more straight dancers to attend our Conventions as well.”

I take this to mean that square dancing as an activity has general purpose appeal, and is relevant. The problem with recruiting is the image that straight square dancing has saddled the activity with, and that the community that’s evolved within that branch of square dancing doesn’t have broad appeal.

When my wife Charlene and I started a brand new square dance club in Petaluma, California, we advertised as “...and straight friendly” on the flyers. When we start dancing again, we will be further emphasizing “Modern” and “LGBTQ” in our literature, and I’m thinking long and hard about which music I use; from trying to minimize anything that sounds too traditional, to being careful about lyrics which reflect the values of the half-century ago in which they were originally made.

We can’t steer the ship overnight, especially not from a little two or three square startup club, but if I can’t see a way to move the reputation of square dancing, it’s just a tool to build community. And if the existing negative brand value of square dancing is too much to overcome, then maybe it’s time to walk away from it and find something else to help bring people together.



From Wikipedia: "Parler has a significant user base of Trump supporters, conservatives, and right-wing extremists. Posts on the service often contain far-right content, antisemitism, and conspiracy theories."

