

CALLERLAB Keynote 2011
Las Vegas, NV
By Mike Seastrom

“Be grateful for each new day. A new day that you have never lived before. Twenty-four new, fresh, unexplored hours to use usefully and profitably. We can squander, neglect, or use it. Life will be richer or poorer by the way we use today. Finish every day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.”

Now this might be a little early in the day, for some of you to think very deeply about these timeless words of wisdom by Ralph Waldo Emerson, but these words can be applied to so many different situations; so many different occasions, and also to a favorite recreation, like our dance in all of its forms

It can be about something as simple as missing your corner during a patter call. That’s right. Emerson says, in so many words, “Forget about it, own it, and go on because you have another sequence to call”

It can also be inspirational. Think of these words, as you start and finish each new day. “Be grateful,” he says. These are fresh new hours of life and we have the choice to serenely jump in, explore it, and live it to its fullest potential. When the day is done, finish and be done with it because tomorrow is a new day.

And as I said, these words can also be about this dance that so many of us have a passion for. Emerson says, “ This is a new day and we have the choice to approach it with a new spirit that is not encumbered with any of the old nonsense of the past.”

I know some of you are thinking to yourself. “Are you kidding me? It’s Monday morning. I’m doing well just being upright in my seat, with my eyes open.”

After that thought goes by, I say to all of you, “This *is* a new day.” Every one of us is holding the reigns to potentially the most amazing social recreation in our time. Our dance is one of the healthiest, wholesome, and fun forms of entertainment that exists in society today. It has, as they say, "social capital", and very few forms of entertainment can say that.

Where can people of all walks of life and all different age groups be together in the same room and interact like we do in our type dancing? Whether it's squares, rounds, contras, mixers, lines or any other related form of group dancing, this is what the entire world can enjoy as a form of healthy recreation and entertainment.

When you break it down to the joy of the dance itself, it’s the feeling of moving to music, working together with others as a team so that you can succeed together, and just plain basking in the joy of an entertainment form that allows for a unique and incredible social interaction with people of all ages and from all walks of life. What other form of entertainment has all this?

Then I have to say, “But wait. We're stuck.” We're locked into an organized form of dance that is too far a reach for the average person or family in today's society to join. Yet this is a dance, throughout its history, that has evolved naturally as the outside world has evolved. Not only has our dance changed since the days of Henry Ford's 1926 book, but our costumes have changed since that time too. Allow me to digress a bit.

When CALLERLAB tackled the huge issue of standardization throughout the 1970's and early 1980's, they did an incredible job of taking what existed at the time, coupled with all the new calls and material that was being created every month, added a projection of the future, and came up with some great programs for all the different dance groups that were dancing at that time. Separations already existed in clubs and dance groups at that time too, depending of how long that group danced and how many times they danced in a month.

Leaders in regional areas in the United States and abroad were already starting to create their own dance programs. Some of you might even remember that halls in the 1976 National Convention in Anaheim were labeled A, B, C, and D according to how many calls were being called. In my opinion, CALLERLAB accomplished standardization just in the nick of time!

We tweaked and changed things over the years and even at one point tried to make our entry program shorter. Our goal was to make it easier for the new dancer to join. But those slow changes were met with big complaints from existing dancers and callers. So after years of trying to "evolve" our entry program to make it easier to learn dance, and being almost split in half in our opinions, we gave up and changed things back to where we started.

CALLERLAB has continued with its focus on caller education and as Bill Boyd said so well in his keynote address last year, “CALLERLAB is the only worldwide professional square dance organization that holds national and international conventions for caller improvement.” Bill went on to say, and I wholeheartedly agree, and I paraphrase a bit, that as professional entertainers and CALLERLAB Members we must act like the professionals we are, and strive to improve and update our skills, talents, and capabilities to keep dancers entertained and coming back.

CALLERLAB is doing this well! Our theme this year is "That's Entertainment". It follows so many great themes of our past Conventions. The information that's been shared by moderators and panelists at our Conventions over the years to help each of us improve has been incredible. If you've listened to the sessions of our Conventions, as many of us have for years, the amount of unselfish sharing of calling, teaching, leadership, people skill, and entertainment ideas has been amazing and almost inspirational. It's no wonder many of us come back year after year when we can, to charge up our batteries.

But wait! As much of CALLERLAB advocate as I am, I still say we're stuck. We're stuck as far as an accessible entry dance program is concerned. I believe CALLERLAB realized a while ago, that we weren't going to easily change our existing dance programs. The majority of our existing dancers and callers just can't go there. We've come up with some innovative new ways to bring new dancers into our club and association based activities and we should continue to do so. We should continue to promote our current club and association based dance forms with as much vigor

as before and support our dance leaders. That's the dance structure we all know and love and have grown up with. Yet as much as I love it, if it's going to survive, we have to come up with a plan. The future of our dance depends on it. If we want our kids, our grand kids and their kids to enjoy this amazing social recreation that we all love, we have to come up with a plan for the future now.

The CALLERLAB Board made a great decision a few years back and endorsed a change originally proposed by our Program Policy Committee. We promoted that change of policy in articles and press releases, by saying that CALLERLAB approves of callers and dancer leaders experimenting with easier learn to dance ideas and events. This could be a way of bringing new dancers into square dancing without the commitment of 20 to 40 weeks. If these new dancers wanted to learn more, we could refer them to existing clubs and their new dancer programs. If this experimental group had enough dancers and the desire to do so, you could form a club with them and move into the existing club and association based dance activity in that area. More importantly, in my opinion, the change in policy inferred that this easier learn to dance program could be a stand-alone destination that people could participate in as their schedule allowed. This, in my opinion, is the key to dancing in the future. It's the key to allowing our kids and their kids the chance to enjoy this dance without making a huge change in their already busy life.

I hear it all the time, and I was asked this question in a taped interview with Dee Dee Dougherty-Lottie at this hotel, just this last Saturday afternoon. How can you get more young people to join you? How can you get families involved and more people to enjoy your dance?

What I said was like a politician might answer a question. I kept it short and positive. I'm sure they didn't want to hear my soapbox anyway. What I say to you is this, "We need a Paradigm shift."

In 1962, Thomas Kuhn, wrote *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* and popularized the concept of "paradigm shift" which is a way to change from one way of thinking to another. It doesn't just happen or evolve on it's own. It's driven by agents of change. One of those agents of change can be CALLERLAB, actively planning for the future.

Our society has changed immensely since our dance enjoyed its most popular time period. We use to target our new dancer promotions to the "couch potato". Today we target our promotions to the "couch potato" and the "mouse potato", which is someone who spends hour after hour of leisure time in front of their computer. We've got the perfect form of entertainment and social capital. It's literally what the doctor orders, but the first rung of the ladder is too high to reach for most people.

Another way of looking at it is to see our dance as a tree. I enjoyed climbing trees as a kid and climbing trees as a dad with my kids, and now as a grandpa with my 7 grand kids. One thing I know for sure, if that first branch is too high, pick another tree. I think it's true of our dance today.

If that first branch in the dance program is too high or takes too much commitment to stay involved, it's much easier to just plain do something else. There are so many choices of recreational activities in society today. So I say, "Let's lower the first branch." We don't need to cut down the whole tree. We don't need to trim the branches of the existing tree. We need to just lower the first branch to make it easier to climb if someone is the least bit inclined. I don't even care if they want to hang on the first branch to stretch a little.

If we embrace a paradigm shift, focus a little more attention in the next several years to an easier learn to dance program, that might be completely separate from our club and association based dance form, we could open our doors to so many more adults and kids who would otherwise not be able to enjoy our dance.

Will some of them venture on to other branches? I say, "Yes, definitely." Some will get the "dance bug" that so many of us have and join our existing activity. Some might not completely join for years, but then maybe, when they get a little more leisure time in their life, they will. Some may never go on, and that's all right too. This idea is not new, but we need to shift more of our energy in this direction for the future of our dance.

It's not that CALLERLAB has ignored an easier learn to dance program. We've had a Community Dance Program for a long time now. We've had a Community and Traditional Committee for years. Bob Riggs, and Cal and Judy Campbell have organized fabulous Beginner Dance Leader Party Seminars before our Conventions for a long while now, as well as Sunday afternoon Community Dances prior to our conventions. We've held many interest sessions on fun dances and how to entertain people that have never danced before during our Conventions.

These are programs that fill this need I'm talking about, but I contend that when you promote it by itself, it's the same product in the eyes of the non-dancer. It might just be a one-time event, and they may come back to another one time event, but that's it.

In my opinion we need a new product and the ability to join it many times throughout the year. But if you call it square dancing, it's the same product in the eyes of the non-dancer.

A few years back, Jill and I did a fun night dance party as a fundraiser for a charity organization. Everyone in attendance had a great time and wanted to do it again. Jill collected lots of email addresses and we found a hall that was a dance studio. This was the Debbie Allan Dance Studio in Los Angeles where kids and adults came for dance lessons all the time. It was expensive, but a nice place to dance, and we decided we'd go out on a limb, pay the \$190 rent, bring in some nice food, canned and bottled beverages, as well as coffee and tea, and charge enough at the door to cover it. It was our risk and we thought it would be a good experiment too.

We created a flyer and contacted all of those folks by email to come to our square dance party. When the RSVP's came in, most couldn't make it and some said that they really didn't want to square dance. Jill and I scratched our heads. They just danced with us and although we did squares, mixers, and line dancing and used music aimed at their generation, when we mentioned the word square dancing, they respectfully declined.

I know we've struggled for years with this image people have about square dancing. We all know what people say and have said for years when you mention square dancing. So with a little money on the line, we decided to put our heads together and get creative. We sent the same email back with the attached flyer about a week later and changed the type of event to a Team Dance. Almost 60 people came to the event.

The other thing of note is that because it was a nice dance hall and we served some quality deli bought salads and sandwiches, bottled and canned beverages with the coffee and tea, we charged \$15 per person. We put that information out on the flyer too and it was never an issue. People don't mind paying a little more than they would for a movie ticket, if they get to attend a nice party, learn to dance, and have quality snacks too.

We held the another event there a while later and had the same success, but when the hall was sold and more grand kids came along, our spare time to organize these dances was lost. It's not lost forever, but at least for now.

My contention is that if we embrace a paradigm shift in CALLERLAB, and possibly consider developing a new product, so there are no stumbling blocks like the image issue we struggle with in square dancing, we could open up a whole new door to this dance we love.

We might have to charge a little more to dance in a nice hall, in a nice part of town, with quality food, instead of cookies from "the 99 cent store". With a name like Team Dancing, any caller could use the dances and music he or she is comfortable with and the success will depend on the caller's ability to entertain those attending to keep them coming back. Dance parties could be held weekly, monthly, quarterly, or whenever possible.

Callers could run these events by themselves with whatever material is needed to teach and entertain those attending that night. It's even possible for existing square dance clubs to run these events periodically. This would allow these clubs to develop a list of potential new dancer contacts with people that they now know socially, before asking them to join their new dancer program.

These events could also be done with existing social groups, at YMCAs, health clubs, country clubs, town halls, as fundraisers and even timed when soccer clubs come into town to play for the weekend. Planning an early evening dance event would allow those families to have a fun dance night together while they're in town. The possibilities are endless, but the potential, that potential of embracing this "paradigm shift" and spreading this dance we love to more people, by making the first limb of the tree lower - that potential is huge.

Is this type of dance event for every caller? I say, "No." Many callers are so busy right now; they couldn't or wouldn't want to take on another commitment. For some callers, it isn't their cup of tea, or some just don't have the desire, the patience, or the skill set to entertain like this. It takes a very talented special caller to successfully do this. Whatever reason a caller may have to pass on these new dancer events, I understand. In life, there is only so much time.

One the other hand, if we elevate the status of a caller who can really do this successfully as they deserve, if we can teach more of these skills in caller's schools, and emphasize the value of entertaining in caller education as we are doing at this convention, we could bring in a whole new breed of callers that could more successfully become proficient in party dance events. I think it's much easier for outgoing individual with good people skills to learn and become proficient at this skill set, than it is in becoming a good sight caller with a battery of memorized get-ins, get-outs, and resolution capabilities.

I say again, this "paradigm shift" has great potential to bring our dance form to future generations in our rapidly changing society.

I loved Ed Foote's speech at the Opening Session a couple years ago. If you've never read it, or haven't read it recently, I encourage you to go back and read it again. I believe it's still on the CALLERLAB website. I read it periodically because it renews my enthusiasm for this unique calling thing we do. He points out what a privilege it is to be a caller, to have an impact on and provide fun to so many people. He defines a successful caller as one who makes people happy not only from the stage, but by individual contact as well. He taught us the word "synchronicity". Read his speech. I know you'll be inspired.

Last year, Bill Boyd gave a great speech at the Opening Session too. I paraphrase Bill for brevity but he said, "In square dancing there are always going to be differences in opinions. There's too much diversity in all of us, but we can all agree as callers, team members, and leaders that we can work together for one common cause. That common cause is to foster the recreational enjoyment of our dancers, in such a way that they have a strong desire to remain in our activity and encourage others to join."

Bill went on to say that in CALLERLAB, by working together, we create synergy and generate this combined energy as a team. This team can better work together to deal with change, deal with conflict, and accomplish far more than we could as individuals. He then says. "It is interesting to note that the needs of the CALLERLAB team are best met when they meet the needs of each individual caller". If you haven't read that speech, get the 2010 CALLERLAB Yearbook; it's in there and well worth your while. Great stuff Bill.

I close this morning by again adding an "S" word. Lets make a "shift" in our thinking. Let's make a "shift" and accept all callers no matter where their time and energy takes them in this activity. We all have our niche and we're all on the same team.

Most important of all, let's make a "shift" and put more of our energy in the future into opening up our doors to more people. If it means developing a new product, possibly with a different name to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society, then so be it.

Let's "shift" our opinion of what we do, and realize that people enjoy our dance, as a form of entertainment. Let's become better at what we do by improving our skills as entertainers. Enjoy and have fun at this Convention because "That's Entertainment"!