
The Rhythm of the Deal: Negotiation as a Dance

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In all the literature on the theory and practice of negotiation, the governing metaphors have been games, war, and fighting. This is true not only for tactical schools of power-based negotiation but even for more constructive, interest-based approaches. Our language is infused with talk of tactics, flanks, concessions, gaining ground, and winning.

This article explores the possible consequences of abandoning this picture in favor of the less-explored metaphor of the dance. We argue that both the content and the process of negotiation can change dramatically once we think of bargaining as an aesthetic activity that can provide intrinsic joy as well as extrinsic benefits. Such a “dance” provides plenty of room for competition as well as cooperation, as movements can be spirited and confrontational as well as smooth and harmonious.

We identify many forms of dance that can occur within negotiation and explore three: the dance of positioning, where passions and presentations interact proudly; the dance of empathy, when the partners come to better understand each other; and the dance of concessions, where the deal is struck and the music concludes.

Finally, we discuss how the dance can be employed pedagogically, in teaching and training negotiation and mediation. In particular, the Brazilian dance of capoeira illustrates holistically and experientially how movement and rhythm can be interpreted both as fighting and as dancing and how we can come to see a process as both aesthetic and

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purposeful at the same time. First feeling, then thinking, and, finally, speaking, we can use this medium to explore the dynamics of confrontation and cooperation in a negotiation setting.

Key words: negotiation, dance, concessions, bargaining, *capoeira*.

Introduction

Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?
— Lewis Carroll

This invitation to Alice can apply as well to those of us who engage in the difficult business of negotiation or mediation. Indeed, this article specifically explores the idea that dance may have something important to teach negotiators. As they engage with others in interdependent situations, seeking to persuade them to make agreements that help satisfy the interests of both sides, thoughtful negotiators may well find particular value in rethinking the way they frame the conversation. They may find that perhaps it is more effective to engage rather than to attack, to play rather than to work at finding a solution, to build trust through the dance of concessions. Good negotiators must learn to dance as skillfully and easily as they are able to fight.

It is the *metaphor* that makes the difference, and the way we frame our thinking. While the literature on metaphor as a fundamental building block of language is of course immense, less attention has been paid to its role in human interaction. Specifically, negotiation, as a particularly relevant form of strategic interaction, is profoundly affected by storytelling, framing, and metaphor. (See articles by Thomas Smith [2005]; Linda Babcock [2007]; and Samantha Hardy [2008] as notable exceptions.)

In this article we ask: what would happen if we were to change the frame of negotiation analysis from a *fight* to a *dance*? What new insights might emerge for both the practitioner and the teacher of negotiation? Could it yield new options for win-win outcomes? Could it also make the process more enjoyable, in addition to building greater trust and yielding better results for both parties? And is this idea significant enough to generate a new theory of negotiation, one that goes beyond the scope of this short article?

The Power of Metaphor

Life is like a picture, or series of pictures: we experience it as we see it, like a film, and it is also like a story, created and lived through narrative, told and retold to all those around us. We experience life through language, framed

by our experiences, shaped by the words we choose, and informed by the worldviews we adopt or inherit. It is, as Robert Frost memorably reminded us, not just language but entire thought processes, the “way of all thinking” (Frost in Cox and Lathem 1966). Far from embellishing our language, metaphor, when properly used and rigorously examined, can be one of the principal shapers of our language. And along the way, they can also unlock creativity and enhance learning.

Metaphor involves understanding one thing in terms of another. The English language and Western culture are rich with metaphor, to the point that some of us no longer realize it. Advertising is rife with it, as is political and popular culture. Since Martin Luther King, Jr. brilliantly invoked the dream metaphor, America, once the Melting Pot, has now become for many a Rainbow Nation. In the 2010 U.S. midterm elections, Barack Obama compared the Republicans to “reckless drivers who put the car in the ditch and now want the keys back.”

In literature, Shakespeare’s plays are a veritable gold mine of metaphor, from “All the world’s a stage” to the “sharpness of a serpent’s tooth” to describe ungrateful children. In popular culture, Dolly Levi famously said that “Money is like manure, and needs to be spread around helping things to grow.”¹ In politics, “King Coal” is a pithy explanation of the challenges of American energy policy. And Abraham Lincoln effectively framed the challenges of conflict with his “appeal to the angels of our better nature” and warnings of the dangers of a “house divided against itself.”

These images not only convey messages more powerfully than more straightforward prose, they can also fundamentally shape our concepts and ways of thinking. In effect, we would argue that practical reasoning is often, at its base, metaphorical, embodied, springing from our unconscious, a product of our imagination and emotion as well as of cognition. Most important, the metaphors we use may indicate or even determine what we believe to be true and actionable. Thus, depending on the metaphor chosen, we can substantially influence both the content of what we believe and also expand the creativity necessary to draw implications from that content.

If this is true, then reality is at least partially constructed by our perceptions, created from experience, grounded in prototypes, framing, and metaphor. We take what is given in the world and shape it for our own purposes, often oblivious to that process. And in the process, we legitimize action for ourselves. Conflict, for instance is often understood as a competition over rights and resources conducted primarily between individuals, especially in such societies as the United States. Other, more collectivist cultures might instead see it as a duel between the dictates of mutual obligation. The Japanese, for example, are guided by different conflict metaphors, such as that of, for example, the household. Other cultures look at

conflict primarily through the frame of power. The metaphor chosen can have a significant influence on the kinds of options generated in that negotiation.

The Metaphors of Negotiation

An examination of the power of metaphor is especially relevant to the work of negotiators because of the ways in which negotiation metaphors can illuminate the dynamics of negotiation. Being aware not just of what we say but also what causes us to say it can yield new insights and enable us to more effectively guide the conversation in a new and more fertile direction for creative problem solving.

Metaphor can be a powerful tool for negotiators on three levels. First, we become more effective when we listen carefully to our own language and thus discover our own frame of thinking about the problem at hand, identifying what some theorists have called the “operating metaphor” (Faulkner 2005). Second, we can, as good listeners, also do the same for the other side, becoming aware of what frames guide their thinking. And third, it is then up to us to consciously decide either to build on the metaphors offered by our negotiation partners or, perhaps, to instead change the guiding metaphors employed, inviting them to participate in a different game altogether, all determined by the language we choose to use.

The most fundamental metaphor that we use in negotiation involves the ways in which we think of its participants. Most of us, at least in Western cultures, are governed by the ideal of *homo economicus*, the rational actor who seeks to maximize his own utility and attain his own interests, whatever those are. Certainly we have learned that the more enlightened of these can be persuaded using rational arguments to bargain integratively as well as distributively, to the extent that they can be convinced that this is in their own best interests.

But imagine what might happen if, as a first step toward playing with the dance metaphor, we follow Walter Fisher’s suggestion (Fisher 1987) and instead think of people as *homo narrans*, that is, as storytelling creatures, individuals who make meaning for themselves and for others as opposed to individuals engaged solely in the endless pursuit of interests. Perhaps mediators are on to something when they start by asking parties to “tell their story,” going beyond just disputed facts to invoke meaning, for this unleashes a different kind of systemic energy.

As we engage in rational and purposeful conversation in a joint effort to find creative solutions to an interdependent problem, we will soon find that our creative, analytic, and social competencies are all stretched and challenged. Harnessing the power of metaphor can be crucial here, because the frames that guide our thinking are critical to both process and outcome. Using dance as a metaphor for negotiation can transform work into play in the negotiation game.

The Language of War and Games

The most common metaphors used for negotiation are not those of the dance, but rather of competitive struggles: *game*, *war*, *battle*, and *fight*. In the spirit of competition, advancement, and victory, we are constantly thinking in terms of rising challenges, subduing opponents, and winning. Naturally expressing the strong human urge for territoriality, we fight for advantage, often at the expense of the other. We do this in our professional lives, as we manage interactions especially with those who are in conflict with us, and often even internally, as we plan for those interactions. In the context of negotiation, both theorists and practitioners have used the game metaphor extensively, both consciously and unconsciously. Our negotiation language is full of it: we *defend*, *undermine*, and *attack positions*, *advance* or *marshal* arguments, plan *strategies of attack*, *give and lose ground*, *offer negotiation ploys*, and *knock out objections*. Borrowing from sports, we worry about *weak flanks* and the *level playing field*, take *timeouts*, *shoot down proposals*, and (at least the most skilled of us) are proud of our reputation for *playing hardball*. Through it all, in the end, the aim is always to *win*.

Even “interest-based negotiators, cognizant of the need to allow room for the other side to be pleased with the agreement as well and always in search of an approach that brings value to both parties, will speak of *concessions*, *strategic moves*, *bottom lines*, effective *tactics*, and considerations of *power*. These proponents of the principled school of negotiation famously popularized by Roger Fisher and William Ury (1981) are still concerned with *win-win*, negotiating the *rules of the game*, maintaining a *tactical advantage*, and always *setting goalposts* for success. They want to *stake out positions*, *drill down for interests*, and always be *tough on content*.

More aggressive negotiators schooled in “dirty tricks” methodologies will dispense with such niceties and extend the competition metaphors even further. They may speak openly of a *new plan of attack*, *leaving them in the dust*, and even *going for the kill*. They will revel in having *a fight on their hands*, and basically *go for it*, all *in the spirit of the game*.

An Alternative Perspective

These metaphors are so pervasive that we no longer even realize the extent to which they govern our thinking and dominate our expressions. And, indeed, they also reflect what often goes on in a negotiation.

What would happen if we deliberately changed the operating metaphors of negotiation? What if we were to consciously imagine the process differently, to see not battles or territory or even winning and losing? How else could we approach the negotiation game, and what alternative picture could we draw and what new insights might it yield?

A clear alternative might be found in the image of the *dance*, a metaphor that has recently been explored by a few scholars (Cohen 2003; Adair and Brett 2005), albeit not yet extensively. If negotiators can just imagine letting go of the “win-lose” or even “win-win” template and also consider the aesthetic dimension of the exercise, one that is fulfilling in itself, the insights that unfold could take both theoreticians and practitioners in unexpected new directions.

Imagine the negotiators not as adversaries but as partners, engaged with one another in an intimate and fairly physical dance. As the music strikes up, they find their rhythm expressing themselves through movement and enjoying the dynamic that such an expression creates. The participants are performers, and their goal is balance, aesthetic pleasure, and fun, not necessarily victory for either or both. With no other purpose in mind, they concentrate on beautifully executing the steps the choreography prescribes, or in more freestyle dances, their movements are unplanned and express their own feelings, sometimes surprising both themselves and each other.

Often this dance is elegant, harmonious, and beautiful to behold, as the dancers fall into a common rhythm and react in harmony to one another, delighting in their own movements and enjoying the response elicited from their partner. This is where the contrast to the war metaphor becomes most apparent. It is the joy of the dance, the thrill of being perfectly in step with one another, that is fulfilling, not so much the result of the exercise because a dance really has no result.

But sometimes the dance is more passionate and also far less harmonious. It expresses intense emotion or even discord. Depending on the dance in question, the steps can become more abrupt and the movements less conciliatory. Some dances, such as the *capoeira* (discussed below), blend seamlessly into a fight. Many are spirited, even competitive, as each dancer focuses more on her or his own performance than on meshing with that of the other. While they are often in harmony, as in the ballet, they can just as well enjoy the fire and spirit of competition and expression. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Three Dances

An alternative to the dominant metaphor is to view the actors in a negotiation as performers, both seeking not just to prevail in getting what they want but also to play the game in a balanced and pleasing way, meanwhile enjoying the intrinsic value of the process. As they engage in the negotiation dance, we can imagine several specific stages in the choreography of the typical proceedings.

Wendi Adair has explored this idea (Adair 2008) in an article in which she specifically tied dance moves to negotiation steps using a cognitive, empirical frame. If we take this idea further, we can playfully imagine three

different negotiations dances: *the dance of positions*, *the dance of empathy*, and, finally, *the dance of concessions*.

The Dance of Positions

As the conversation begins, picture the music striking up for a spirited *flamenco*. The dancers draw themselves up to their full height, and proudly, confidently, and almost showily commence the first steps. Full of fire, they expertly execute the *desplante*, the *pica*, and the *zapateada*. There is much stamping of feet, postures are erect, gazes are fixed, and staring. Each presents himself or herself in his or her best possible light, seeking to dazzle and impress with his or her technique, passion, and power. This is the *dance of positions*. (It is demonstrated at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGsvCQx8cqY>.)

This dance is almost solipsistic, with each dancer concentrated on her own bargaining technique and on the impression she is making on the audience, be it the dance partner or even the third parties closely following the proceedings. She has no real need to engage particularly with her partner, as this initial dance is mostly about her and the presentation of her positions. Through the movements, but also thanks to the “traditional costume” — in this case the external picture she presents to her partner — as well as her stance and overall expression, she creates not only her catalogue of demands but also an identity, for herself as party or for the entity whom she represents, a persona that also demands attention and compensation for the show on offer.

Occasionally, this dance can be impressively beautiful, with the steps beautifully executed and the catalogue of demands clearly and forcefully articulated. But sometimes it can seem aggressive and demanding. In any case, it is, like its sister the *tango*, full of power, passion, and emotion, as both parties express not only their identity as articulated through their steps but also the passion that underlies their positions in the fervor of the dance. Certainly, they seek for their position to be understood and valued, but first of all they are gratified by the chance just to express what they think and feel. In taking their initial positions, they have laid down the markers of the space they demand, and established just who they are. This is not the end of the dance, but a good beginning.

The Dance of Empathy

As the cadences of the music — and the rhythm of the negotiation — shift markedly, the dancers now take up a very different set of moves. We are moving from spectacular to even more expressive dance. The tone is now softer, less confrontational, an expression of what each partner seeks. The castanets give way to strings; the dance has now become a *ballet*. As body stances soften and movements become more elastic, we realize that the negotiators have shifted to the *dance of empathy*.

In this dance, playfully illustrated at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEpToIz9Ku4&feature=related>, the telling of each story continues, and expression continues to reign supreme, but now it goes deeper, beyond demands and arguments. The dancers show more of themselves, perhaps demonstrate vulnerability, revealing more and more information as to what really drives them. They take us deeper, beyond positions, to an area that is more ambiguous and personal. Each negotiator seeks to convey his or her own deeper needs or interests. But the choreography now also calls for them to interact more completely with their partners. This requires an added focus on the moves of the other, and a synchronous pairing of movement. Questions are not only asked but also rephrased and returned. Offers are responded to in kind. The two are now dancing together, not separately. And, importantly and increasingly, each one must trust the other one not to allow him or her to fall.

For some of the time, the music is sweet, and the movements harmonious. The dancers find a common rhythm, falling gently into step with one another. They find they have some common or compatible interests. But then the tension builds, as what is being expressed when one diverges from the narrative of the other. One dancer becomes the pursuer, the other the pursued. At times the pursuit grows more intense and can even turn to an open conflict. Even passive poses such as the *attitude* send a message that goes beyond that of the choreographer's intended narrative. The dancers express their emotions freely, even when those emotions are anger or fear, and when their interests are clearly not the same.

Certainly, the dancers do not always express themselves equally; one may be more trusting than the other. But at the end of the ballet, at least to some degree, the dancers *understand one another*. They have moved beyond the showy posturing of the flamenco and achieved real communication, anticipating the moves of the other and appreciating his or her style. They know where their goals are in harmony and where their interests are undeniably different. Although no resolution to the negotiation dance is yet in sight, the interaction has progressed. The objective may not yet be reached, but the interaction has built trust. The two have learned to communicate openly with one another and developed a common mutual understanding. They are ready to move to exploring options and offering concessions.

The Dance of Concessions

And then the music changes yet again. Now it becomes livelier, more hopeful, but also more purposeful. The dancers pause and shift positions, eyeing one another playfully, clearly set to try new things. The step is now one of *jive*, and we feel the energy rise as they begin the *dance of concessions*.

Now the rhythm becomes decidedly jaunty, and the first dancer drops to a crouch, in preparation for the first move of this different new dance. He leans forward and, demonstrating a jazzy movement, offers the first new pattern of the new step, encouraging his partner to respond in kind. As she moves forward herself, the eyes meet, the hands lock, and the first joint turn of the jive is executed. Offers beget counteroffers, the bargaining has begun.

The moves become more athletic and more creative, as each dancer first pulls the other to his side, then pushes away to protect his own space. At times, the dynamic is confrontational, with proposals that are boldly anchored and threats to walk away. Moves are made slowly, then with increasing speed. But, somehow, the dancers manage to find some sort of harmonious resolution, even if it emerges from unexpected poses. Somehow, always, they find a point of common repose, where trade-offs have been duly honored before embarking on the next exchange of movements. This dance is, we realize, highly *improvisational*, much less planned and choreographed than were the previous two. Within a minimalist set of rules, it is up to each dancer to continually offer creative new moves, and then to the other to find an appropriate response, topping the previous gesture with one of his or her own. Movements are loose, with hips, shoulders, wrists, and ankles always free to engage in ever new combinations in a seemingly carefree celebration of energy.

In this dance, it is easy, even exhilarating, to give ground to the other, making offers and then counting on reciprocity from the other. Far from losing face or power, this is all done in a sense of play, a celebration of the moment. Sometimes a dancer will pause unexpectedly, deliberately slowing the pace to just stand and repeatedly tap the foot, then move the hip jauntily in one direction, with the hand and shoulder shooting off in another, a new and surprising “offer” for the other to consider. The tapping provides excitement, teaching us to listen to as well as look at what is happening, and the polycentric nature of the moves, with virtually anybody taking turns as leader keeps each dancer, literally, on her toes.

Finally, as the pace quickens ever further, the dancers work themselves up to a frenzy. They trade moves ever more quickly and furiously, in the process, engaging more and coming closer to one another, with a physical closeness and energy that would have been unimaginable in the dance segments before. Things become more concrete, as the agreement slowly takes tangible shape. As the music reaches its climax, they join for one last twist and flip, then collapse exhausted but invigorated, in full enjoyment of what they have just experienced together.

Capoeira: Fight or Dance?

This metaphor of dance in negotiations can be employed far beyond the traditional focus of popular Western dances as described above. Consider

capoeira, for example, an acrobatic dance with Afro-Brazilian roots involving fluid movements combined with ritual, musical rhythm and fighting style. *Capoeira* goes beyond traditional dance as it blends a loose choreography with martial-art-inspired maneuvers, in an interactive game with sequenced movements to the sound of the *perimbau*, a rudimentary musical instrument made of wire and half a coconut shell. Once prohibited for slaves who disguised their fighting practice as dance, and subsequently banned until the 1930s, it has now become a national sport in Brazil and is fast spreading throughout the world. (An example of *capoeira* can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMX9KKzG4-0&feature=related>.)

Both Fight and Dance

Capoeira, especially as considered relative to negotiation, reveals a unique fusion of opposite metaphors related to both fight and dance, with much relevance for negotiation. For when two *capoeiristas* engage in athletic dance movements, they are essentially playing a game (*jogo*), during which they continuously explore their strengths and weaknesses, their fears, and fatigue limits. For this is a ritualized fight with no physical contact and independent movements of the *capoeiristas*, who essentially do little more than signal their level of skill to the opponent. As a dance of harmony, grace, and playfulness, *capoeira* operates without any truly normative system of codified rules. Creative chaos is integral to the parties' interaction, and their gradual process of learning and acquiring skill. Each interaction between parties is unique and inspired by improvisation, leading to different sequences of movements with each repetition.

The inside of the *roda* (ring or circle) marks the center of attention, like a negotiation space with two delegated parties, surrounded by the energy of the observing community. The more skillful party will always control the space at the center of the *roda*. The bystanders are observers, but also informal judges, actively involved in the dance. They clap, sing as a chorus, and can also change the rhythm of interaction as defined by the lead *capoeirista* playing the *berimbau*. As such, we can view them as negotiation stakeholders signaling to the individual negotiators in the center of the *roda*, first just watching but then also switching roles as they enter the ring themselves, changing the makeup of the negotiation team as the situation warrants.

The Aim of the Dance

Perhaps surprisingly, the objective of *capoeira* is not to win or even to weaken the opponent, as we would expect in traditional power-based approaches to negotiation. As they move, *capoeiristas* generally do not even make physical contact with each other. Instead the emphasis is placed on skill, on feigning moves, and on theatrical sequences of attack and counterattack. A *capoeirista* chooses to demonstrate his superiority not by striking the opponent, but simply by cleverly showing what he could have

done. The values of respect, responsibility, freedom, but also the notions of provocation and power, are intrinsic to this unique dialogue of bodies. Thus a skillful dancer may also initiate a movement without concluding it, merely to assert his dominance inside the *roda* as a powerful signal to his counterpart and to the community of bystanders. As they are attacked, the players have the opportunity to practice evasive techniques before switching roles again between leading and following, attacking and defending.

Movement as Conversation

Capoeira is a nonscripted discourse, an interactive, highly spontaneous game of announcements, questions, responses, demonstrations, and challenges between two parties who are expressing themselves through thoughtful negotiation with each other. But here the negotiation is expressed without words, through physical motion. Rather than seeking to defeat an opponent, each participant strives to demonstrate his acquired skill in the eyes of the community and to earn respect among its members. Indeed, respect is the watchword of this dance, both from the audience and from each other, but mostly for oneself. Overall, the protagonists learn to reflect as much about their self-awareness, expression, and personal growth as they do about their alternating opponents and their movements inside the *roda*.

Tactical Games

At the heart of *capoeira* lies the phenomenon of *malicia* — commonly referred to as deception or trickery. This is where *capoeira* illustrates the art of the bluff in negotiations, with one party tricking the other into an unwise or ineffective response, an awkward position or an evasive defense. Such moves are expected, aspired to, and much admired by the audience, and thus have no automatically negative connotation. They are valued for their cleverness and skill and the aesthetic satisfaction of all the dancers as well as the audience, with no necessary ethical dimension.

The term *malandragem* refers to the art of trickery or the application of *malicia*. It is considered as one of the main gateways to fully appreciate the art form of *capoeira*. Masters of effective *malandragem* have developed an astute sense of observation and anticipation of moves and effective responses. Their cunning movements develop into a fluid dance of tactics, movements that threaten without ever actually hurting the opposite partner, almost like playing a series of chess moves solely in the minds of the players, without ever making a first real move.

Capoeira as Metaphor

Tactics are key in *capoeira*, as is the verisimilitude of its movements to actions that could otherwise have potentially serious consequences. The fun lies in learning about the self as well as about one's counterparts, all while engrossed in this fluid sequence of signals, countersignals, moves, and reactions. The

thrill of mastering and demonstrating the techniques of the dance with virtuosity is at least as important as whether or not one is declared the winner by the *roda*. *Capoeiristas* as negotiators explore every angle of the deal; they carefully absorb the various moves, signals, and tactics of their counterparts, all without ever committing to any concessions on their side. The purpose is not to win but to understand, while exploring the positions and interests, strengths, and weaknesses of the other party.

Thus, we cannot say whether this dance is integrative or distributive in the traditional sense. It is both. Like skilled negotiators, the *capoeiristas* must always keep their aim in view, and do their best to “win” the dance. But this purposefulness is leavened by the sheer delight of the dance. Certainly, through this continuous process, both parties’ awareness will grow and should ultimately lead to better outcomes when the real negotiation is concluded. And they will have had a very good time along the way.

Perhaps we negotiators, as we watch a *capoeira* session, can learn from the intuitive thinking of these dancers, applying it as best we can to our next negotiation setting. While we may not have the time to become experts at *capoeira* ourselves, it is the freshness of this different approach that can generate new understanding.

Lessons Learned

Applying *capoeira* as a metaphor for negotiation challenges such dichotomous constructs as fight versus dance, harmony versus war, and adversaries versus partners. Indeed, we see that these can well be reconciled within one construct. Creatively accessing a metaphor such as this, we argue, can help us understand more of the varied facets of negotiation and approach the field in a more differentiated way.

If negotiators are able to do this, we hope they will see that there are many shades of gray on a continuum of competition versus cooperation as extremes. Negotiation as a dance suggests a metaphor that is richer, more dynamic, and more nuanced. It suggests that rigid role definitions can be flexibly altered, messages can be conveyed without threat, and interactions can be pleasant and pleasing even if neither party “wins.”

Finally, dance as a metaphor for negotiation underscores the paramount importance of mutual trust and respect among the negotiating parties in order to achieve sustainable win-win outcomes, even in the midst of great tension and furious positioning. For this reason alone, the dance is worth our consideration. Ballerinas will fall if they are not properly lifted, and jivers can get hurt if the response to their moves is ill considered. The metaphor thus offers an insight that is lacking under the war and game metaphor: we need each other if we are each to succeed.

Certainly a direct application of all of this is applicable to negotiation teaching. One method would be to incorporate dance literacy into the curriculum, a *capoeira* performance, for example, just as some negotiation

instructors now incorporate training in improvisation. While dance may not be as immediately accessible a form of experiential learning as role — plays, body language, or theater, it can, in many cultures, be a powerful method of teaching. In any case, we encourage trainers and coaches to experiment further with it in both the classroom and other academic and corporate learning settings, even in the more straitlaced West.

In actual negotiations, our view is that the dance metaphor is probably best used as a reflective tool, especially in the early stages. Encouraging negotiators to think more playfully about the process, we think, could generate more creative responses and perhaps strengthen their relationship. It is difficult to truly dislike those with whom we have shared a dance.

Of course, the dance metaphor itself suggests some significant challenges. Can it be adapted to multiparty negotiations, when multiple partners vie for a space on the dance floor? How does the negotiator engage a partner who does not want to dance, who is unskilled or just unwilling? What music might entice her? Does the negotiator have the flexibility to revert to content and traditional scripting when the limits of the dance metaphor are reached?

Finally, we hope the ideas put forward in this brief essay might inspire scholars and practitioners to consider further the intuitive power of metaphor and the ways in which metaphor can be applied to negotiation. Once we choose to join Alice in the dance, who knows what manner of strange and appealing creatures will turn up?

NOTE

1. Note that this is technically a simile. We will use “metaphor” to describe a whole family of linguistic devices, including similes, as well as metaphors.

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