“It takes two…” : tango and the creativity of leadership

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with Sue Cox

“At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is…
… Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.”

T.S. Eliot, ‘Burnt Norton’, II
from Four Quartets

I.
If there is to be any hopeful human future, it can now only be reached through transformative change. Leadership into and through such change will need to be bold, imaginative, hard-headedly realistic and above all creative. The question for this paper is not where we will find such leadership – we can only believe that it is somewhere out there and will arise to answer the call when the time comes – but how we can learn to trust ourselves to it when it does arise, and to follow it as it deserves.

The requirement for transformative change becomes apparent once one recognises the sheer impossibility, now, that merely incremental change could save us from the consequences of anthropogenic climate destabilisation. This is clear from what one of us has elsewhere called the Vicious Syllogism (Foster, 2015: 3): put briefly, if we had been going to avert the massively disruptive climate change and associated ecological degradation which will shortly start turning present civilisation upside down, we’d have begun to put effective policies in place forty years ago when these concerns were first seriously mooted; but we didn’t; so we won’t avert it. This argument is valid and its premises look to be true. At least, the minor premise (that we didn’t act effectively) is true, and the hypothetical major premise asserting that we are out of time would seem to be as well-grounded in the scientific evidence and in economic, sociological and geopolitical realism as any empirically-based counterfactual could hope to be. The possibility of our succeeding through the ordinary processes of increasing public awareness, social negotiation and political action in turning the lumbering super-tanker of the carbon-dependent global economy around on a sixpence in the few years we have left before levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide take us past the tipping-point which
will trigger global temperature rises of 4°C and above, is simply incredible, on all those
counts, to anyone seriously considering it. The conclusion follows by simple logic:
realistically, massively disruptive and damaging climate change is going to happen.

Latterly, however, as this prospect has become unignorable, a kind of response has been
emerging which seeks to reclaim the idea of realism for an alternative stance towards it. The
keynote of this response is sounded by the American writer Rebecca Solnit (2004/2016: 109),
who has been a powerful advocate for it:

“Hope is not about what we expect. It is an embrace of the essential unknowability of
the world, of the breaks with the present, the surprises.”

Disillusioned observation picks up on what we have come, reluctantly, to expect – the
grindingly slow political foot-dragging, the backsliding and the failures of commitment, as
well as the widespread public resistance to any but superficial shifts in habits and lifestyles –
and projects these forward. But as Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012: 189-91) point out
in the same spirit as Solnit:

“…there is also discontinuous change…structures that appear as fixed and solid as the
Berlin Wall can collapse or be dismantled in a very short time…a threshold is
crossed…There is a jump to a new level, an opening to a new set of possibilities…”

This, with its deliberate emphasis on unguessable possibility, is the realism of
transformation. Change of this kind is by its nature not predictable merely by extending
forward the incremental history of what has hitherto been the case. The concept of the
tipping-point applies not only in climate science but here too: change which is quite
implausible to all observers ex ante can happen suddenly and startlingly once a critical mass
of people starts to believe in it. The transformative possibilities inherent in human action may
be triggered if enough people commit themselves vigorously to enough specific campaigns,
resistances and individual reformations; the overall situation which makes such commitment
look forlorn might then suddenly change out of all recognition.

But none of this will happen without committed leadership. The kind of leader whom we
shall need will not be some unimaginable superhero, but will certainly have to deploy the
naturally-arising creative powers through which leaders work in dynamic duality with
followers to make new things happen in the world – it is the gift of these capacities to which
the term charisma in its original meaning refers. Such charismatic leadership will have to
draw with far greater consciousness and intensity than in any ordinary circumstances on the
capacities inherent in all human leadership. The crucial characteristic of any leader is that he or she *goes out ahead*, in speech and action, to articulate an emerging common will among the relevant group, and to initiate collaborations through which that will pursues its ends. The leader, by what he or she says and does, realises the group’s shared purposes – purposes in which, unled, it would be unable to share, because they would not exist as such without the leader’s prompting. Leadership, that is, has an essentially *expressive-creative* role. The leader’s words and actions, directed by his or her alertness to the group and taken up acceptingly by that same group, create something real that was not there before. Through the creative-expressive agency of those with leadership gifts – insight, attentiveness, articulacy, focus, determination, aptness for responsibility – human groups both constitute their goals and organise themselves ongoingly around the pursuit of them.

Charismatic leaders use these gifts neither to impose such goals, nor merely to propose them. Rather they frame aims and approaches which they intuitively recognise as apt for group endorsement, because expressive of what is there but presently unformed in the wills of relevant others. This must be especially so for leaders in conditions of transformative change. Leading into and through the breakdown of systems, institutions and long-established expectations of control which coming climatic and ecological disruption will bring, they will help those whom they lead to discover options for resilient reconstruction both of life-ways and of self-understanding, which in the nature of transformation were simply unavailable for consideration beforehand. Such leaders are, we could say, the poets of praxis, opening up insights and re-making possibility.

An advantage of this analogy is that it helps us also to appreciate the nature and importance of *followership*, which goes with leadership as its essential corollary. Followership is what characterises those with whom the leader co-creates the possibility of shared goals and common action. Crucially, this is not the commonality of the flock all starting to drift in one direction, but a specifically human community of conscious intention realised in and through the meeting of leader and followers in the articulation and pursuit of goals. The follower role draws on capacities which can equally be called gifts (although in the nature of things they much are more widely distributed than those which make leaders) – powers of recognition, acknowledgement, sincerity in response, critical alertness and disciplined submission when appropriate. Followership is the strength to be led without giving up your individual responsibility. Followers are the engaged audience or enactive constituency of praxis.
Only such a conception of leadership-and-followership could be adequate to what is coming. As will be evident, however, it raises very sharply the problem of how such charismatic leadership, in particular, is to be justified. It is no good saying that it is justified if it gets us through breakdown – justifications of means by ends are notoriously dangerous, and nowhere more so than in political contexts where cravings for mere power and dominance are always lurking to seize what licence they can by reframing the ends of collective action (even such ends as these) to suit themselves. But then the justification of what the charismatic leader does has to be intrinsic to the idea of expressive-creative leadership, and about this there is a deep problem. Put starkly: the leader’s expressive and pragmatic articulacy guides the group by bringing into being its common will; but how, if not to this common will, is leadership to be held properly accountable for what it does in any such expressive process? To the extent that the leader is principally responsible for articulating the goals and standards in term of which he or she is to be held accountable, the force of ‘accountability’ drains away – the process is too evidently open to abuse. But if leadership is to be unaccountable, does that not imply the ceding of untrammelled initiative, and therefore ultimately of power, to the charismatic leader?

The problem of justifying charismatic authority is thus structurally related to a very general problem for understanding human creativity. If creators (of any kind) are unaccountable – and that is, ultimately irresponsible, acting purely gratuitously on what is at bottom nothing more than their own behalf – what they create can have no more claim on our attention than our own equally gratuitous likings and dislikings accord it. But genuine creative work clearly carries authority – it shapes, convinces and compels. If, however, this authority derives from the accountability of creators to others, via sets of established rules and guidelines, the essential freedom and spontaneity of creation will have been lost. And how could the process of creation be held accountable (which seems the only other option) to itself?

This last is a deep question, but it is vital that we find at least a rough-and-ready answer to it, at least as it applies to charismatic leadership through climate crisis. Otherwise we may simply yield to the instinctive suspicion of such leadership, and corresponding refusal of followership, which can be promoted by a petulantly egalitarian and Twitter-democratic culture. Or, at best, we may accept it, but blindly and without also accepting responsibility as co-creative followers. Either would mean failing to collaborate with putative leaders in ways
which would enable potentially transformative change to be initiated. And such failure would entail on the world consequences which in no very long time would prove not just disastrous (disasters are coming anyway), but catastrophic

II.

Asking how something can happen, rather than how it does happen, is the distinctive province of philosophy – in fact, of metaphysics (the study lying beyond –mēta – the operational-mechanical questions which are the province ultimately of physics). But there are two major difficulties with any turn to metaphysics in this connection.

One is that the metaphysics of creativity apparently requires us to justify paradox. The idea of an activity’s being accountable to itself seems as irredeemably paradoxical as that of its preceding itself. So the metaphysics involved will have to be, even qua metaphysics, pretty hard going.

Well before we get to that crux, however, there is the purely methodological difficulty that, for any general audience, metaphysical considerations are likely to be so inaccessible as to guarantee loss of interest and attention. The abstract-conceptual nature of such considerations is for most people a sure-fire turn-off, and where one has to resort to them in order to ground conclusions even of urgent real-world importance, the argument for those conclusions is always in practice going to be drastically weakened.

One might try to bypass this difficulty by appealing to the analogy already glanced at in passing, between the creativity displayed in charismatic leadership-and-followership and that informing the writing and reading of poems. The poet exercises his or her gifts in producing an expression of individual perceptions and emotions, which must for all that be an artefact of the common language in which (as a condition of its intelligibility, and so of its original significance for the poet) other minds can meet, realising it as their own experience. In language, just because its meanings are a common possession, you cannot say just anything you like and be coherent. It follows that you cannot think or feel just anything you like, either: the “individual perceptions and emotions” which the poet expresses are already more-than-personal, possibilities of significant experience found or revealed in expression and not brought to that process out of the private self. And what is thus found or revealed as something inherently shareable, is also very evidently something real – “the poem”, beyond
its co-creators in a common world, something which their expressive powers are both responsible for, and responsible to. This ‘beyondness’, as an encountered structure of significance with which we are grappling, which emerges as significant for us only in that grapple, but the significance of which (crucially) we can get wrong as well as right, is a fundamental part of any experience of serious literary engagement.

This analogy points in all the right directions. Unfortunately, however, it doesn’t cut the methodological mustard. The kind of familiarity with great literature which calls forth the idea of minds “meeting” in a language-formed reality of serious significance is now very much a minority accomplishment – and the relevant conceptual and critical sophistication in regard to the nature of language and poetic experience is likely to belong only to a minority of this minority. The would-be explanatory analogy is now in fact going to be almost as opaque to a general audience as are the metaphysical characteristics of human creativity which it is supposed to be illuminating and grounding.

In her management training workshops based on Argentinian tango¹, however, one of the collaborators in this paper, Sue Cox, has discovered a parallel, but much more accessible and compelling analogy and demonstration, which we use the rest of the paper to introduce and explore.

III.

If you watch, as an outsider, people dancing Argentinian tango, it looks not just complex, passionate and beautiful, but impossible – or at least, impossible as improvisation. Unless the couple are performing a set sequence of perfectly rehearsed moves (as in synchronised swimming, for instance), how on earth don’t they trip over one another and fall in a heap? And this is not just a case of wonder at in-principle-explicable dexterities which we don’t yet fathom, as you might wonder how on earth the conjuror produces the egg from your ear, but already a question with philosophical depth to it. How can two people so perfectly coordinate what they are doing when they don’t know what they are each severally going to be doing until they are each doing it? How can they be guided in improvisation, as they seemingly must be, by the very co-ordination which they are improvising? This is a puzzlement not about hidden niceties of technique, but about the logic of what is going on.

¹ See www.ballroom2boardroom.com
Yet we also know, of course, that the evolving movement here is ongoingly improvised, and that the impossible co-ordination must actually be possible, because there it is, happening before our eyes! What this gives us is a kind of embodied transcendental argument, a proof from the fact of something’s existing that whatever turn out to be the necessary conditions of its possibility of existence must also be the case.

Transcendental arguments, says the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Honderich, 2005: 922-3) are “anti-sceptical arguments of the form: There is experience; the truth of some proposition $p$ is a conceptually necessary condition of the possibility of experience; therefore $p$.” A classic example comes from Kant (1787 / 1933), who made arguments of this form central to his philosophical enterprise. The necessary truth of the proposition ‘Every event has a cause’ is proved by appeal neither to experience nor to logic (since either appeal must fail for Humean reasons2), but by showing that the uni-directional nature of causality is conceptually required for the coherence without which experience would not even be possible for a conscious subject. (It is only this uni-directionality which can distinguish the necessary orderedness of experience from mere randomly-occurrent sensation.)

As that suggests, typical philosophical uses of such arguments are challengingly abstract and conceptual-metaphysical. But here in the tango case we are much nearer the earth. If something happens it must be possible (otherwise it couldn’t have happened), but then whatever is needed for it to be possible must be true. Improvised complex co-ordination of movement happens – it is indefeasibly real for experience in tango, and (as the tango-innocent collaborator can testify) discoverable as such even by people with woodenly clumsy feet who are learning to approach it at the most elementary levels. By the same token, other not-too-dissimilar practices of such improvised co-ordination in complex activity are available to perfectly ordinary experience and observation; these include certain sports (football for instance); musical improvisation; role-play (drama); exploratory discussion and argument…3 All these are familiar, if not quite everyday, pursuits within which the kind of *prima facie* “how on earth…?” doubts about possibility posed above for tango are decisively

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2 Experience cannot show us that future events will have causes too, though the claim about every event must mean that. Nor is the idea of a cause already contained in the idea of an event (as that of sharing grandparents with someone is contained in the idea of being a cousin, for instance) – an ‘event’ is something that happens, while ‘cause’ introduces the separate idea of making something happen.

3 Poetic meaning is improvised too, but not so obviously. Any reading improvises constantly among meaning-possibilities which the conjunction of reader’s and author’s experience as realised in *these words* brings to life.
refuted in accessible actuality. But that then requires that whatever has to be true to make such practices possible, actually be true.

And crucially, even if what has to be thus true is apparently deeply paradoxical, the burden of proof is shifted firmly onto anyone trying to deny that these paradoxes nevertheless characterise reality.

IV.
What kind of thing has to be true for tango (sticking with that iconic case) to be possible?

Sue Cox, cited above, says apropos of it: “I am interested in how co-created movement emerges from what I call…‘the space between’; not what I do or you do, but those ‘moments of infinite possibility’ between us when we connect with shared intention.”\[^4\] But what is this space? We can equally ask: where is the dance that these two people are creating, the achieved fluid unity of their individual sequences of movement, actually happening?

Evidently it is actually happening somewhere, and co-incident with the dancers as they move around together. But press the questions and the logical difficulties leap out. For the co-created movement can’t be happening where each of these distinct individual movement-sequences are happening, since it is something conceptually distinct from these, precisely their unity, that we are talking about. And yet how can it be happening anywhere else? If it is real movement it must be transacted, surely, in space: so, again, in what space?

It is not, clearly, happening in the literal “space between” the two members of the dancing couple, in which (since by definition this is empty space) no movement is taking place. Nor, as above, can it be happening in the spaces traversed respectively by the movements of each individual member of the couple – and in any case, while these are literal spaces of movement, they are not ‘between’ anything relevant.

But nor are we talking about merely a co-incidence or matching of two separate sets of movements in adjacent spaces. We can certainly recognise that phenomenon in simple cases of spontaneity (the instinctive movement around one another of passers-by in a crowded street, for instance), and also there is the kind of carefully performed synchronicity noted

\[^4\] Private communication.
above in the swimming case. But genuinely improvised complex co-ordination takes us beyond either of these models, into a ‘space’ where each participant is leading and following co-creatively at the same time.

What one finds oneself compelled by these reflections towards saying is that the dancers co-create improvised complex movement by meeting, or as their meeting, in what we have to call the space of the dance. The music, the conventions of tango and the collaborative intentionality of the dancers within their connection combine to establish this ‘space of possibility’ which exists “between” them – not literally between them, but (crucially) more-than-metaphorically between them, for if ‘between’ or ‘space’ here are taken metaphorically, then we have next to ask what that is a metaphor for, and we come straight back round the circle to be logically defeated again by the considerations which we have just been canvassing. The ‘space between’ in which the dancers’ intentions meet is the space of open possibility which is the dance that ‘between’ them they create.

Such a mode of being, not literal yet not metaphorical, breaks down in paradox if we press on the words as standing for logically cohering concepts of spatiality, meeting and intention. A meeting, for example, presupposes a space already there as its location, yet here the meeting and the space aren’t distinct. (We can recall Eliot, from my epigraph, who also says later in the same poem:

“Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.”)

By the embodied transcendental argument, however, we can say that the dance, being indefeasibly a real occurrence, carves out, or establishes, or constitutes, a real space wherein what is for the ordinary usage of words paradox, must nevertheless be a non-literal but also non-metaphorical way of characterising what is really going on.

Crucially, in the space thus carved out, we can appreciate the equally paradoxical reality (it is, I think, essentially the same paradox from a different angle) that in tango the movements which seem to result from the co-ordinated intentions of the dancers are also, and must be for the intuitive co-ordination process to have a hope of working, patterns by which their respective movements are jointly and severally guided, in the very process of realising those
same improvised patterns: patterns, that is, which must be recognised to guide the activity constituting their own creation. Within the common language of tango shared by the partners – in the space of meaning constituted by well-recognised kinds of music, by already-explored options for different kinds of responsive move, and by their mutually-recognised ‘tango characters’ – the intentions of each partner are not distinguishably private, as we must take their respective individual consciousnesses to be, but an essentially collaborative intentness on ‘what comes next’ which is shared between them and which can, as such, inform their otherwise-inexplicable commonality of improvised but co-ordinated movement.

Here the tango analogy can be seen to join hands with the remoter and less generally accessible analogy from poetic creation which I was canvassing earlier. And it is apparent that in both analogies we are grappling, emblematically, with the fundamental phenomenon of all creativity. This, as noted above (p.4) is the phenomenon of something’s really emerging from and through intention, to which that same intention is itself somehow clearly answerable. The reality of this possibility is why we must talk of creativity here, and not just of the generation of something which is the causal product of an intention which will in its turn be the causal product of…etc. In creativity, the remorseless uni-directionality of causal sequence is transcended, and what emerges can be the informing principle of its own production. Expressed merely in words, this is again as paradoxical as the idea of something’s preceding itself must be. But we know from indefeasible experience, as in the tango case, that it both makes sense and happens – that because it happens, in fact, it must make sense.

We might compare here, with the literary analogy still in the frame, a remark of the novelist Jeannette Winterson⁵: “There is a moment when you realise that the energy you’re using is not your energy. When you’re in that moment of absolute concentration, you feel that it’s not you anymore…All creative people recognise this.” What is recognised is that the energy coming through is not merely ‘your own’, something in your own possession, but something in relation to which you stand as a kind of servant or executor – but it is, equally clearly, an energy of your concentrated intention and will, coming from within you. That an irresistibly real dimension of the experience of creativity has to be captured in this paradoxical way should by now be unsurprising.

⁵ In an interview in The Guardian (22.10.05).
So the methodological hope prompted by the embodied transcendental argument which tango and similar practices can be seen to represent, is that not just “all creative people” but anyone capable of reflecting a bit on what must be going on in any of these various ‘spaces of shared improvisation’ (more and less mundanely pervading our lives), will be able to acknowledge their deep underlying features of creativity for what they are and involve – without any (further) appeal needed to metaphysics. If that hope can be realised, we shall have found a way of showing clearly by analogy how charismatic leadership can be justified in general terms of its creativity: that is, how the co-creative efforts of leader-and-followers can bring into being something for which the leader bears a principal responsibility, but also to which he or she can be held genuinely accountable within the evolving dynamic of the whole collaborative process.

V.

If this gives us a general justification for such leadership, there remains the pragmatically important challenge of testing actual claims to it and practices of it against criteria which that justification legitimates. Here again, we have found the tango example offering much help, in the form of the basic principles for starting to learn how to approach the dance which Sue Cox inculcates in her training workshops. These principles apply as they stand to tango, but can readily be adapted as guidelines for creatively-responsible leadership-and-followership, and by the same token as criteria for assessing how such leadership, in particular, is performing. They offer practical guidance for active commitment to the co-creativity which is a necessary condition for tango’s being possible; their translation into terms of leadership, if it can be carried through convincingly, will similarly offer guidance for commitment to, and thus criteria for evaluation of, the creativity required for leadership into transformation.

The first two, linked, principles are: Inhabit your body and Bring your whole self to the connection. For tango, this is about being mindfully aware of your own body as a way of helping it do the embodied responsive thinking called for by the dance, and thereby being fully present as a whole body-and-mind to the partner’s full presence. In terms of leadership, it makes clear that genuinely creative-therapeutic leaders need to be speaking not just to the depths below accepted but now breaking patterns in others, but from those depths in

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themselves. They don’t just facilitate breakdown and retrieval of integration in others, but they do this – can only do it – out of their own wholeness. Responsibly creative leadership will thus always be checking in with its emotions and bodily states, and will be facilitative of others’ doing the same. It will not call on itself or on others either for more or for less than whole selves can plausibly give.

Relatedly, tango requires you to Engage your core – that is, to will your movements from the solar plexus not from the top of your head, and thus drive forward in a fully embodied way rather than either drifting or moving ‘theoretically’, as it were. For leadership, this means that your engagement in the formation of the common will through your own must matter to you, must be life-significant not merely an abstract or theoretical commitment, must come from the guts, if you are to lead creatively. Responsible leadership will initiate dynamically in this embodied way, from and through the life-impulse of the leader – and it will inspire in followers an equivalent sense of shared life-drive and purpose.

A fourth principle of tango is to Use the ground – deliberately to draw on the up-bearing support of what is felt beneath your feet, to give power and precision to your steps. For leadership this is, unsurprisingly, a call for ‘groundedness’, which any leader needs as part of being genuinely creative. Groundedness in this context means always being ready for the test of an appeal to hard experience, always being where people are at, and not flinching from real emotion and direct speech. (It very usefully emphasises that ‘creative leadership’ doesn’t mean, as it is too frequently and lazily taken to do, fluency in corporatese and management-gobbledygook, wacky off-the-wall ‘blue-sky’ ideas flung out at random, constant striving to be ‘ahead of the curve’ for the sake of it, a constantly unappeased itch to re-organise, nor any of the other radically uncreative tics taught on conventional management courses.)

Tango is a dance for couples, and it requires each to Project intention and Be in constant dialogue – that is, to communicate movement intentions through signals and pressures which are always responsive to those being signalled by the partner, in a permanent feedback loop – a process of ongoing ‘invitation’ and mutual ‘listening’. The creative leader needs to enact in an analogous way the difference between listening to followers (vital) and deferring to them – sometimes sensible, sometimes politic, but often to be resisted. The leader will often need to push ahead in line with firm intentions rooted in confident reliance on the feedback and ongoing dialogic modification which will accompany and qualify them. It is a test of
genuinely creative leadership that it has the kind of strength to do this, and of followership that it has the robustness to accommodate and support it.

The least obviously transferable principle is to *Express the music* – tango is stylised but improvised movement to music, and this principle tells participants to be alert to the full potentialities of this specifically blended medium of expression, responding co-creatively to what the music – which sets a context beyond each pair of dancers – calls forth from all. But it may also prompt us with a final, unexpectedly illuminating insight into leadership. There is a kind of ‘music’ of collective action, comprised in the different rhythms, tones and styles which link any goal-directed shared activity into its wider context of action, and all of which have to be brought into an overall harmony. The responsibly creative leader will think of him- or herself not as *composing* this ‘music’, but more as listening for it (without a score!) and expressively conducting its ‘performance’ by the particular ensemble – also of course including the conductor – with which he or she is engaged.

Of course, none of these criteria for creative leadership can be applied mechanically – like any other test in matters of fundamental human importance they depend on judgement. And there are corresponding questions (essentially, indeed, the same questions) to be asked about the criteria for exercising creative responsibility *in judgement*. This hints at depths which we can’t here offer to plumb. But enough has been said, at least, to indicate the vital epistemological and educational role (as demonstrated so effectively in Sue Cox’s practice) for embodied transcendental arguments of the kind iconically represented by tango.

References


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