

TANGO SOCIETY OF MINNESOTA

TANGO MOMENTS

DEDICATED TO FOSTERING AND SUPPORTING ARGENTINE TANGO IN MINNESOTA

Winter 2007 • Volume 9, No. 1

Tango for cause

By Pauline Oo

What's better than dancing to good music? Dancing for a good cause. About 55 people turned up at the Eagles Aerie Club in Minneapolis on Jan. 20 for the Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity fundraiser hosted by the Tango Society of Minnesota and Mandrágora Tango Orchestra. The four-and-a-half hour event raised \$1,217.

Habitat for Humanity is a nonprofit organization that seeks to eliminate poverty and homelessness by building affordable housing for low-income families. Habitat relies on volunteer labor and contributions of cash, materials, professional services, and property to build the homes. More than 200,000 Habitat houses have been built around the world for more than 1,000,000 people in more than 3,000 communities.

"We chose Habitat because they are a super-efficient charity, and [the members of Mandrágora have] all had positive experiences with it before," says bandleader Bob Barnes. The Mandrágora quartet of Barnes (accordion), Ewa Bujak (violin), Scott Mateo Davies (guitar) and Ron Bacardi Yanes (bass) performed without their regular fee—100 percent of the evening's proceeds went to Habitat. DJ Dave Rost and tango teacher Rebecca Abas volunteered their services; Rebecca taught a

Tango for cause, cont. on page 2



Photo by Adrienne Page Photography

Lisa Thurstin, new TSoM board member, and husband Eric are part of the growing Twin Cities tango community. TSoM, with about 160 members, plans to focus on increasing membership this year. (For more on Lisa and Eric's wedding, see Miscellany, page 10.)

Twin Cities tango community is flourishing

By Pauline Oo

Merriam-Webster's defines a community as "people with common interest living in a particular area." The Twin Cities Argentine tango community has more than tripled in the past decade since a handful of residents took a liking to the dance. There are classes, practicas, and milongas pretty much every night of the week.

Yet quantity is not a sure sign that a tango community is successful. Quality and cooperation must also exist, says Clay Nelson, organizer of Portland tango festivals Valentango in February and TangoFest in October—two of the biggest

tango events in the United States. A community that is committed to inclusiveness and working together is more likely to grow than one in which competitive attitudes prevail.

In their notes for an upcoming guide to building a successful tango community, Clay and Megan Pingree, tango teacher and DJ, define a successful tango community as one with a critical mass (or greater) of people who want to dance, regular well-attended milongas with good music, harmony between participants, and good quality dancers. And here in the Twin Cities, we're well on the way. ■

From the president

The vision for 2007

This year, the board is focusing on growing TSoM. We want our community to be vibrant, with many places to dance and many people to dance with. How do we achieve this? Several people in our community attended classes at other festivals that focused on how to grow your community. The major point was to be open and inviting to everyone—new people, instructors, and dancers—and to new ideas.

A consistent comment at the festival in Minneapolis was that our people were very nice and welcoming. Let's continue to build on what is clearly one of our core strengths. Let's accept the differences in style and approach toward the dance. The more diversity in milongas, classes, and activities, the broader the range of people in our community.

Currently we have more than 160 members. I'd like to grow that to 180 in 2007 and 220 in 2008. A new committee is looking for ways to grow and retain our membership.

The TSoM Web site has a new etiquette page outlining what is expected at milongas. Please share this with others. Etiquette creates a common language among dancers, making people feel comfortable. In time, we'll add more resources. Thank you for being patient during the construction.

—Diane Hillbrant



Mandrágora musicians Bob Barnes (clockwise from bottom left), Ron Bacardi Yanes, Ewa Bujak, and Scott Mateo Davies donated their time and money to the Jan. 20 Mandrágora and TSoM Habitat for Humanity fund-raiser.

Tango for cause, cont. from page 1

one-hour lesson from 8–9 p.m. Eagles Aerie donated the room, and local teachers Lois Donnay and Florencia Taccetti, along with Rebecca, donated private and group lessons for the raffle.

"I've wanted to dance the tango for a long time, and I finally tried it a year ago," says Tom Gigowski. "I came tonight because the connection to Habitat struck me. I've been a volunteer for Habitat for three or four years now, building houses in Minneapolis. It's a great cause."

Shaun McKinlay agrees, readily handing over wads of cash for the pay-as-you-can admission and raffle tickets. Shaun won a group class for one couple in the raffle.

"I'm happy to donate," says Shaun. "It's a good cause, and I also got a class, live music, and dancing out of it, and I won the raffle."

Shaun had learned about the event from some local dancers at the January TSoM milonga. He is a returning dancer, having taken tango

lessons in college 15 years ago.

"I am blown away by how much tango there is [in the Twin Cities]," says Shaun. "And I am amazed by how friendly everyone is. They're all happy to dance with a beginner. Or let's just say, I haven't been turned down yet."

More TSoM- and Mandrágora-sponsored charity events are in the works, check www.mntango.org or subscribe to [@mntango.org](https://twitter.com/mntango.org) to stay informed. ■

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My tango family (what is community?)

By Gretchen Larson

I often talk about a tango community, but what exactly do I mean by that? I define a tango community as a collection of people that associate by choice, and for some of us, necessity, like members of a 12-step program or an extended family. No one controls membership or takes attendance in this community/family, you don't have to be Argentine, understand Castellano, or acquire an alternate identity to participate. You can't buy your way in or be invited in because you know the right people or wear the right shoes. You belong if you choose to devote your time and passion; there are no shortcuts! Eventually you will be faced with two questions: How much do you want and what are you willing to give?

One of my favorite teachers says that he wants to know the answers to these two questions "because I need to know what to give, and what to receive. Maybe this is my job as a teacher—to show you the different sides of the dance. And then let you decide for yourself: Do you want the tango? Does it call

you in the middle of the night? Or is it just a way of killing 'free time?' I don't want to help you kill your free time. I want to help you find kindling to fuel your fire. I want to show you how to gather wood, rather than smother the coals with an abundance of things that you don't need and don't really want."

In many ways, a tango community reminds me of an extended family, the people you might see only at holiday time. The people who suffer with you through the terrible twos and awkward adolescent periods. The people who can say to each other, "Remember when cousin Cory screamed all the way through grandpa's Christmas toast? Or "Remember that year second cousin Lucy went Goth?" We give each other permission to change, to be ourselves even if it involves plastic surgery or hair implants.

A tango community embraces special people, like a family—even weird uncle Gordon is accepted. It's a big potluck supper—a lot more fun when you bring something to

the party! It requires us to be non-judgmental of ourselves and others as we belong for as long as we have two feet to dance and the desire to do so with a consenting partner and others of a like mind.

I have a partner who reminds me regularly that his tango education is on the 20-year matriculation plan, and I think it's a good idea to approach it that way. Acknowledge that people have different agendas for participating and that time changes us all. Be gracious. I personally hope to die on the dance floor at an advanced age and gain a great deal of comfort from the fact that I have not even scratched the surface of the experience yet. (Thus far, tango has taught me a lot about myself, and I have become a better human being by identifying myself with all of you.)

Don't be discouraged; it takes a lifetime to make a tanguero/a. That term, while not complimentary in the early days, was worn as a badge of honor by those from whom we have inherited this rich treasure of human experience. So come to the potluck and bring something to share; it will change you! ■



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Tango guidelines

By Bill Boyt

Navigating the floor

1. Do not move against the line of dance, and that means dancing counterclockwise around the room. Avoid stepping back into the line of dance because you risk stepping on a follower.
2. Watch for the wait staff, they are just trying to do their jobs. Give them the room they need.
3. Take steps appropriate to the amount of space available. Large steps may look stylish but the community knows you are being impolite.
4. Do not pause for more than the time it takes to repeat “Mandrágora Tango Orchestra” a few times. Remember we are all dancing as one—when one couple stops the rest soon have to stop. If you want to pause longer move to the center of the floor.
5. Do not teach on the main floor and never offer a suggestion without permission. Milongas are not practicas. (Note to instructors: milongas are also not venues to recruit students.)
6. Both leaders and followers should keep their feet close to the floor unless they are certain that no one is within range. If you misjudge and touch someone, apologize at the first opportunity. We understand that mistakes happen.
7. Tangles, losing balance, being off beat, attempting unpracticed steps are all the leaders’ fault—provided the follower maintains her own balance, steps with the beat, attempts to follow, and does not back lead.



Bumping into other couples is a no-no at a milonga.

Guidelines for milongas

1. There is a reason that Argentines use eye contact. It doesn't interrupt conversations, it works over relatively long distances, and it establishes a special connection before the dance begins. Those who don't allow for eye contact make it harder to get invitations to dance.
2. When the follower agrees to a dance, it's a gift. An agreement to dance usually means you will dance for a minimum of two songs. Etiquette suggests you dance until the end of the tanda (set of three to four songs).
3. When the person you would like to dance with is having a conversation, state your interest in a dance (eye contact works nicely) and allow the conversation to draw to a close.
4. The leader offers a step, provides an invitation, and the follower decides whether to accept the offer. Unaccepted offers are to be appreciated as an important reply in the conversation. Leaders should not insist. This is not wrestling.
5. Show appreciation for live music. It's a gift from people who are playing from their heart; respond appropriately.
6. Following your dances, walk your partner to the edge of the dance floor closest to where you entered the floor. Do not just walk away.
7. Close embrace is a gift not a right, do not assume the close embrace position unless invited.
8. Remember to talk with your partner between dances; it is considered polite to extend the talk through the first few bars of the next song. If you are going to talk longer, move off the dance floor.
9. Other dancers are part of your family; treat them like you will see them again. Like any family member, we have unique personalities, respect for each other, and joy in sharing with each other.
10. Have fun. ■

Bossy leaders on the tango floor

By Nick Aguilar

I was talking with a young, new, lady tango dancer at the Loring Pasta Bar in mid-January. The subject of the men teaching while dancing came up, and she said there were really “a lot of bossy men” on the dance floor. When she used the word “bossy,” her tone of voice revealed that this “bossiness” is quite an unpleasant thing.

I’m guilty of doing this myself, but I have developed, what I think, are tactful guidelines for doing so. When dancing with a very new beginner, I’ll dance a tanda with her. After our tanda, if needed, I will ask her: “Would you mind if I give you a tip or two on your tango technique?” Almost without exception they

say, “Yes, please do.” They seem sincere about it, but perhaps they’re just being polite. I figure if these women have danced a tanda or two with me, they know whether or not I’m an acceptable dancer.

If I’m dancing with a woman who shows up a lot for dances but doesn’t go to classes, I will ask her the same question after a tanda and encourage her to take some classes—and I do know that time

and other commitments can keep people from taking classes.

I remember as a beginning leader, I didn’t care for unsolicited advice or teaching while dancing. A few times some experienced and gracious followers, after a tanda, would ask me if I wanted feedback, and I was always grateful for it. These days, after a dance or even during a dance if practical, if I feel my technique was not up to par, I ask the woman outright for that particular feedback; and I’m always

Bossy leaders, cont. on page 8

Stephen Peters

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Dancing with the elusive Porteños

Story and photos by Steve Lee

There are many horror stories about Twin Cities dancers' first trips to Buenos Aires. Most deal with how bad it went at the milongas—there are stories of partners walking off the dance floor in the middle of their first tango, stories of dancing only one or two dances the entire evening and being accosted by Porteños when all you wanted was a drink and small talk. Despite these stories, last November I decided to take a chance and see what this dancing in Buenos Aires was all about. Why would I spend that kind of money to go there to be shot down and put in my place? Because the timing was right and so was the airfare. The steaks sounded pretty good too. After being there, I can see why some people before me have had a hard time. One trip does not make me an expert on Argentina nor have I experienced all of the pitfalls, but I think many of these horror sto-

ries could have been avoided with a little foresight.

Fully expecting to "go down in flames," I was all ears whenever someone who had been there had something to say about their trip. I wanted to be prepared as much as possible. The experiences of and advice from good friends helped me to avoid many of the problems other people had faced; some pitfalls I missed by sheer luck. I think if more people contribute their experiences, we can have a higher rate of successful trips to Buenos Aires.

Below are my "do's and don'ts" for the Argentine tango scene. All of these things helped to put me in a position to enjoy the milongas in Buenos Aires.

Blend in and stand out

Someone suggested I bring two empty suitcases for shopping. I planned on having a new wardrobe when I returned because of how style-minded the Argentines are and how inexpensive it is to be

fashionable. I saw what they wore and that's what I bought. What I inadvertently did was cater to one of the Argentines' top priorities. You have to look good. The milongas I went to are frequented by dancers who are impeccably dressed. The "tourists" often got negative attention because of their jeans, athletic shoes, and baseball caps. You don't want to stand out for the wrong reason. Wear what they wear to blend in, but stand out by being sharper and neater.

Bookmark yourself on their "mental dance card"

Ever notice that when you walk into your favorite dance venue at home, you scan the floor for the people you usually dance with? You probably have already decided on your mental dance card who you're going to dance with. The Buenos Aires tango venues are the same, with one big exception. The experienced dancers have a long history of networking. Their cards are already filled. In my opinion, this is the reason why it's so difficult to get a dance with the good dancers. They, like you at your favorite venue, have already mentally filled up their dance cards with their usual partners and are less open to anyone else. You need to get on their dance card.

A good way to do this is to attend the lesson before the dance. The more basic the class, the higher the chance you can make the class material look clean and neat. Remember that you are on display. Look good and the rest of the night you will have easy pickings. Those preferred dancers will be looking for you because they have bookmarked you in their minds. Screw up and you might as well go to another milonga.



Street dancers at Plaza Dorrego

Each milonga has its own rules

Watch and figure them out. See what it takes to blend in. Will a host or hostess seat you? Is there a section for “couples only?” Are there separate sections for men and women? Take note of what dancers are doing and how they’re doing it. How fast are they going down the line of dance? How much space is there between couples? Are there lanes? Do they pass each other? What steps do they generally use to get around the dance floor? Is it different at different times of the evening? Know the answers without thinking about them. These are the “how we do things here” that you must know to avoid stepping on toes. Being inconsiderate on or off the dance floor can be embarrassing to prospective partners. They will not give you a chance if they think you might make them look bad.

Don’t dance with just anybody

Appearance is priority one. When studying how things are done at milongas, keep an eye open for possible dance partners but don’t just look for any partner. For your first dance, be very selective about who you dance with. If you dance

well with a good dancer, you’ll be rated at that level and be open to that same level. If you start with a beginning-level dancer, you’ll be dancing with this group the rest of the evening. You want someone who is as good if not better than you. Only after you’ve danced a lot and built your partner base and reputation, can you dance “lower.”

Don’t get fancy

The Buenos Aires dancers favor simple perfection over complicated screw-ups. Trying something complicated and messing up in the middle of the dance floor is very embarrassing. Dancers watching will avoid such embarrassment at all costs and those who cause it. Do low-risk, basic steps that will increase your chances of looking good. Keep it simple.

Don’t teach or be taught on the dance floor

This doesn’t make either person look good. If you are being taught, counter by walking away. If you are seen teaching, you could lose prospective partners because they don’t want to be treated like a student on the dance floor.

Don’t dance two tandas, one after the other, with someone you’ve just met

To protect her reputation, a woman should turn down a second tanda—unless a large interval of time has passed. Dancers who know each other can and will do it, but for dancers who have just met, it looks like something besides a dance is going on. If that’s the case, you discretely go out for “coffee.”

Don’t accept invitations for post-milonga “coffee,” unless you want more than coffee. I thought “coffee” meant an after-dance meal like we have in the Twin Cities ballroom community. Not so. This coffee comes with a need for a cigarette afterwards. Nuff said?

Anyone who can think of other do’s and don’ts, jump right in and add them. An “Idiot’s Guide to Buenos Aires” might just be enough to turn a “not-so-hot” Buenos Aires trip into a good one for someone else. For me, thanks to the stories and advice of my dance buddies, it turned out to be a great and memorable one. ■

Next article: *The “Eye Game.”*



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Bossy leaders, cont. from page 5

grateful when she gives me friendly and helpful advice.

Sometimes while dancing, one partner will do something that requires, more or less, immediate attention. At that point, the other partner should tactfully address the "mistake."

Leaders, we must make the beginners feel welcome, comfortable while on the dance floor, and enthusiastic about returning to it. If we lead something the follower is not yet prepared to do, then we must, during that particular dance, simplify and adjust our leading to the follower's level to give her the most enjoyable and musical dance that is consistent with her level of experience. This is creative leading.

On the other hand, what the heck do I know? Concerning this little essay and just to get the conversation going, I'm open to any replies and feedback from leaders and followers on this subject. Teaching while dancing is something we need to think and talk about. In the long run, it affects the good growth and reputation of our tango community. ■

BR

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Toe to toe

A column by John MacFarlane

One of the things I liked when I took my first Argentine tango class was not having to explain myself. There were no forms to fill out, no nametags, no inquiries about occupation, did I like coffee or tea, or was I Swedish or Norwegian. All of us there were simply interested in learning the tango. We were in it together.

I have often thought of this little facet of my tango experience in light of the pride of difference that runs through our world today. Yes, we can get shot by intruding on someone else's turf, right here in river city. Differences make life interesting, but they can destroy what we hold in common. Spices make a recipe delicious, but overdone, the dish is lost.

Community, in life and in tango, is more important than divisions. There are only so many stories in the world. What's interesting are the differences. But what makes them understandable is that they are common to all of us.

Let's draw a circle around us and not lines between us.

I like what 19th century poet Joaquin Miller wrote:

*In men whom men condemn
as ill
I find so much of goodness still.
In men whom men pronounce
divine
I find so much of sin and blot
I hesitate to draw a line
Between the two, where God
has not.* ■

“but you’re pulling me” ■ “you’re not stepping back far enough” ■ “you’re falling on me” ■ “your head is in my way” ■ “my arm is numb” ■ “stop running away without me” ■ “did you know embellishments are not supposed to interrupt what I’m leading” ■ “my back is killing me from those volcadas” ■ “you’re holding me so tight I can’t breathe” ■ “you’re pushing me off balance”

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JAVIER ROCHWARGER

in town the first two weeks of March.

He will be teaching at Four Seasons on Wednesdays and Thursdays, March 7, 8, 14, and 15.
He will also be available for private lessons.

Javier’s dancing originated through the true social tango scene in Buenos Aires. He studied tango to develop his dance skills and became an instructor who really understands the teaching/learning perspective. He is fluid, dancing and teaching old style, new style, close embrace, neo-tango, and mixing elements of each.

JAVIER BUCHER

Still warming up the cold with tango! ■ Did you know it’s summer in Argentina?

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Miscellany

Share your news (new baby, wedding, death, etc.), tangomoments@hotmail.com.

Local tango dancers Eric & Lisa Thurstin married Oct. 21, 2006.

"As we prepared for our wedding, we decided our first dance should be a tango. Lois Donnay helped us choreograph a dance to "Tango to Evora." My dress was a ball gown by Birnbaum and Bullock specially made to show off my blue wedding shoes, which were customized in Argentina. Our wedding tango took us two months of serious practice, but everything—the dance and the wedding—was incredible.

Tango dancer and University of Minnesota graduate student **Kristin Helle's "Connection,"** a tango-related video, is part of "A Woman's Perspective on Mind, Body, Spirit" multimedia art exhibition through March 31 in Fargo-Moorehead. A

video segment stars local dancers Pauline Oo and Javier Zuniga.

On March 30, **Mandrágora will play at Shakopee Ballroom**, 2400 E. 4th Ave., Shakopee. Free lesson at 7:30 p.m.; dancing until midnight. During band breaks, DJ Bob Barnes will play a mix of neo- and alt-tangos.

Mauricio Castro workshops and classes will be held March 16–22 at Four Seasons. (Times vary; flyers are available at the studio or e-mail Florencia Taccetti at ftaccetti@yahoo.com.)

Andrea Du Cane is hosting **tango teacher and DJ Robin Thomas** from New York Aug. 3–6. Watch your e-mail for details.

Tango at Midtown Global Market every Sunday, beginning Feb. 18. TSoM will host a free lesson and open dancing from 1–2 p.m. at the food court in the market (corner of Lake St. and Chicago Ave. S.) Local instructors will take turns teaching the 30-minute class. Show your support—come dance! Parking is free on weekends. ■



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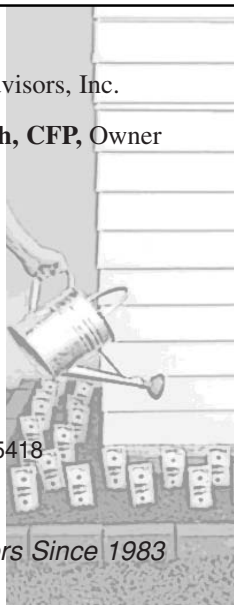
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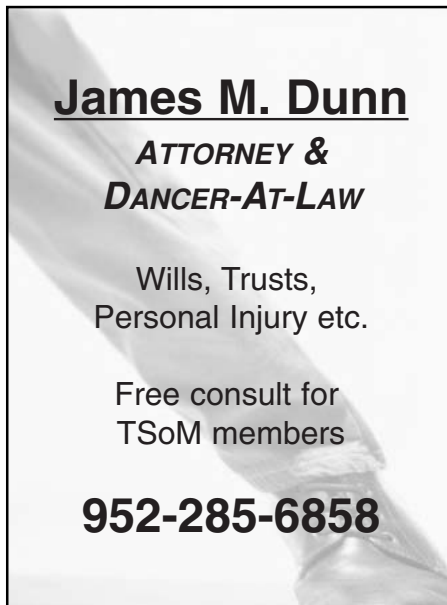
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Stop the rumor!

By Diane Hillbrant, TSoM president

Currently there is a rumor that TSoM has a policy that prohibits the scheduling of a visiting instructor or workshop within six weeks of another scheduled workshop. ***This is not a TSoM policy.*** Some of the instructors and promoters in the Twin Cities entered into this informal agreement among themselves.

TSoM was not involved in creating this agreement. It also does not support, condone, or participate in any policy, agreement, understanding, or discussion that in any way would inhibit, limit, regulate, or restrict the number or frequency of workshops, milongas, or classes etc. in the Twin Cities. Furthermore, TSoM has not and will not be involved in any attempts to establish minimum prices for any events, which may include but are not limited to classes, workshops, milongas, or any other activities. The TSoM board only determines the prices for its own events. TSoM's role is to promote Argentine tango in the Twin Cities, a role it takes very seriously. Any policy, such as limiting the frequency of workshops, classes, or milongas would violate its mission.

For questions regarding this issue, please don't hesitate to contact me at diane_hillbrant@yahoo.com or you can also speak to any board member.

This is the second time this issue has come up in the past six months. To avoid further confusion, the TSoM board is publicly distributing this information and adding it to its Web site. ■

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Tango couple Vessela and Kalin have been TSoM members since September 2005. They are originally from Bulgaria and moved to Minneapolis in 1995.

TSoM hotline

For current information on milongas and other tango events in the Twin Cities.

763-576-3349

Member spotlight

Names: Vessela Kouneva (V), psychotherapist, & Kalin Kounev (K), mechanical engineer

How did you get into tango?

V: I discovered tango in Bulgaria, when my mother was dying and I was taking care of her, trying to hold onto my sanity. During that difficult time, tango allowed me to connect to my body and senses for the first time in a long time. I discovered the healing power of movement and fell in love with Argentine tango.

K: And so Vessela found tango for both of us!

How often do you dance?

V: Not as often as I'd like. If I win the lottery, I'll dance every day.

K: I dance 2–3 times a week, and that is enough for me, but I like to watch tango clips on my cellular phone every day!

Biggest challenge?

V: Relaxing!

K: Dancing to music I don't know and waiting for Vessela to cross!

What does tango mean to you?

V: Somebody once told me that the meaning of tango is striving for perfect connection with the other. That made a lot of sense to me.

K: Tango for me is pleasure.

Tango mantra?

V: Be in the moment!

K: Experiment with new possibilities!