

Tony Parkes on Caller's Talents

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Written by Max Newman with excerpts from Tony Parkes' book *Contra Dance Calling: A Basic Text*.

What is "talent" when it comes to calling dances? What makes a talented caller? These are perhaps not questions one can fully answer in a sitting, but I'd like to share one pretty good stab at it.

Tony Parkes, Boston-area caller of contras and squares, recently published the 2nd Edition of his landmark book, *Contra Dance Calling: A Basic Text*. This book is "the first comprehensive entry-level book ever written on contra dance calling." It's exciting that it's back in print in a revised edition after being unavailable for some time. I got my copy and was struck by, among other things, his observations on talent and calling.

Tony breaks the somewhat abstract talent of "calling" into its constituent parts, each of which contributes in some way to being a good caller. His list contained a few things I wouldn't have considered (spatial sense!), but which make perfect sense upon reflection. Everyone, of course, has a different set of these and Tony's advice for adapting to your own individual skills is quite helpful. I found this overall approach insightful and a little inspiring, too — whether applied to calling or a host of other concepts.

Here's an excerpt:

Talent
Your talent is a gift from God. It's appropriate to be thankful for it, but you don't need to be apologetic about it. A caller needs a moderate amount of many different talents, rather than a great deal of just one (see the list below). We're given talents in varying amounts, but we have the ability to develop them. It's important to be honest with yourself about your talents. Then you can be thankful for the ones you have in greater measure, and willing to work on your weak spots.

Don't get discouraged just because you have those weak spots. No one, not even your favorite caller, has a full measure of every possible talent. One of the finest callers I know has what some people might think an insurmountable handicap: he is not at all musical. He has compensated for this over the years by learning everything he could about the structure of dance tunes and by making careful notes on what tunes work well with each dance that he uses.

Another caller suffered from near-terminal shyness when he began his career. He dealt with it by treating his calling as an act, in which he could relate to people under a different persona from the one he used offstage. Little by little the act became a genuine part of his personality, and now he is only moderately shy.

Here is a list of talents or qualities that are helpful to the caller. Some of these apply more to the professional than to the casual caller; others will come in handy in any calling situation.

- *Self-confidence*
- *Patience*
- *Good judgment*
- *Emotional balance*
- *A sense of rhythm and timing*
- *A pleasant speaking and/or singing voice*
- *Good diction*
- *Musical ability*
- *Good memory*
- *Spatial sense (ability to see what's happening in the set)*

- *A love of people and a desire to see them happy*
- *A delight in bringing order out of chaos*
- *Perseverance in the face of disappointment and frustration*

Remember, no one has all of these to the same degree. If you're lacking in some, you're just as well off as anyone else who's starting out. If you feel you lack nearly all of them, though, you might reconsider your decision to be a caller.

Above all, you must enjoy what you're doing. If you do, your dancers will too.

Each of the points in Tony's list is worth an essay in and of itself. I'm sure we could also append interesting qualities and sub-qualities worth considering. A few that came to me:

- Sense of humor
- Creativity
- Appreciation of fiddle music
- Ability to speak the "musicians' language"

Are there yet others that come to you? Is this list any different for English callers? I find it pretty absorbing to consider how this approach applies to musicians. As always, your comments are welcome.

Thanks to Tony for allowing me to quote his book so extensively. You can [buy the book here](#).

– Max

