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- Functional Movement Exploration
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RETHINKING TOUCH, CONSENT AND PEDAGOGY IN CONTACT IMPROVISATION



What is Contact Improvisation?

- Partner-based improvisational dance.
- Initiated by Steve Paxton in the 1970s

https://youtu.be/zkreiRt8GEY?si=YyJhmZ_UKSgnJaRk



Martial artist, dancer, choreographer and researcher.
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Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity -Challenges teaching CI in this changing landscape

- **Changing student demographics**
 - Socio-economic and cultural backgrounds
 - Gender identities, neurotypes
 - Dance backgrounds, body types, learning styles, and learning pace

They also bring different:

- Experiences of trauma
 - Access needs and support requirements
 - Cultural understandings of physical boundaries, consent, and interpersonal interaction
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Relational shift:

- Hesitation around touch and proximity
 - Trust can no longer be assumed.
 - Vulnerability and physical contact now require far more negotiation
 - More students opt out due to stress, sensory overwhelm, trauma, or discomfort with touch
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WHY DOES TOUCH MATTER IN DANCE?



Power dynamics - Who gets to take space in the classroom?

Some students arrive already authorized by social norms to:

- Take risks
- Lead
- Be visible

Others must first negotiate:

- Belonging
- Safety
- Legitimacy.

Tensions in my teaching practice between:

- The technical demands of CI and caring for everyone's needs in the room.
- Artistic risk and students' psychological safety.
- Accessibility and consent.
- Productive discomfort and perceived unsafety.

RETHINKING TOUCH, CONSENT, AND PEDAGOGY IN CONTACT IMPROVISATION

Re-examining my teaching practice

- Pedagogical choices
- The values of Contact Improvisation
- Reflecting on my role as a teacher and what authority means today.
- My own cultural conditioning

**How can I keep everyone engaged while
establishing an inclusive learning environment
where all students feel seen, welcomed, respected,
valued, and safe to participate fully in Contact
Improvisation?**

Influential Frameworks

- Marshall Rosenberg (1934 -2015) – Nonviolent Communication – A Language of Life
- Moshe Feldenkrais (1904- 1982) – The Feldenkrais Method
- Betty Martin – The Art of Giving and Receiving – The Wheel of Consent

Frameworks' Shared Principles

- Slow us down to pay attention to internal cues, sensations and feelings - to trust and to value them.
- Teach us to develop awareness - how we move, relate and communicate
- Expand our choices in how we respond and act
- Teach us to stay with what is rather than avoiding it or trying to change it.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

4 STEPS

1. **OBSERVING** – giving feedback based on what you see, hear, and physically experience, without judgment.
2. **FEELINGS** - Identifying and expressing your feelings
3. **NEEDS** - Identifying and expressing your needs – judgments of others often reflect our unmet needs
4. **REQUEST** – asking for concrete actions that could meet your needs and enrich your life.

If "violent" means acting in ways that result in hurt or harm, then much of how we communicate could indeed be called "violent" communication.

Nonviolent COMMUNICATION

A Language of Life



Words matter. Find common ground with anyone,
anywhere, at any time, both personally and professionally.

MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG, PhD

Foreword by Deepak Chopra

Endorsed by Tony Robbins, Arun Gandhi, Marianne Williamson,
John Gray, Jack Canfield, Dr. Thomas Gordon, Riane Eisler, and others

Relevance of NVC to Contact Improvisation

- Clarifies needs and boundaries
- Supports consent
- Develops empathy and listening
- Navigates discomfort and conflict
- Strengthens relational awareness

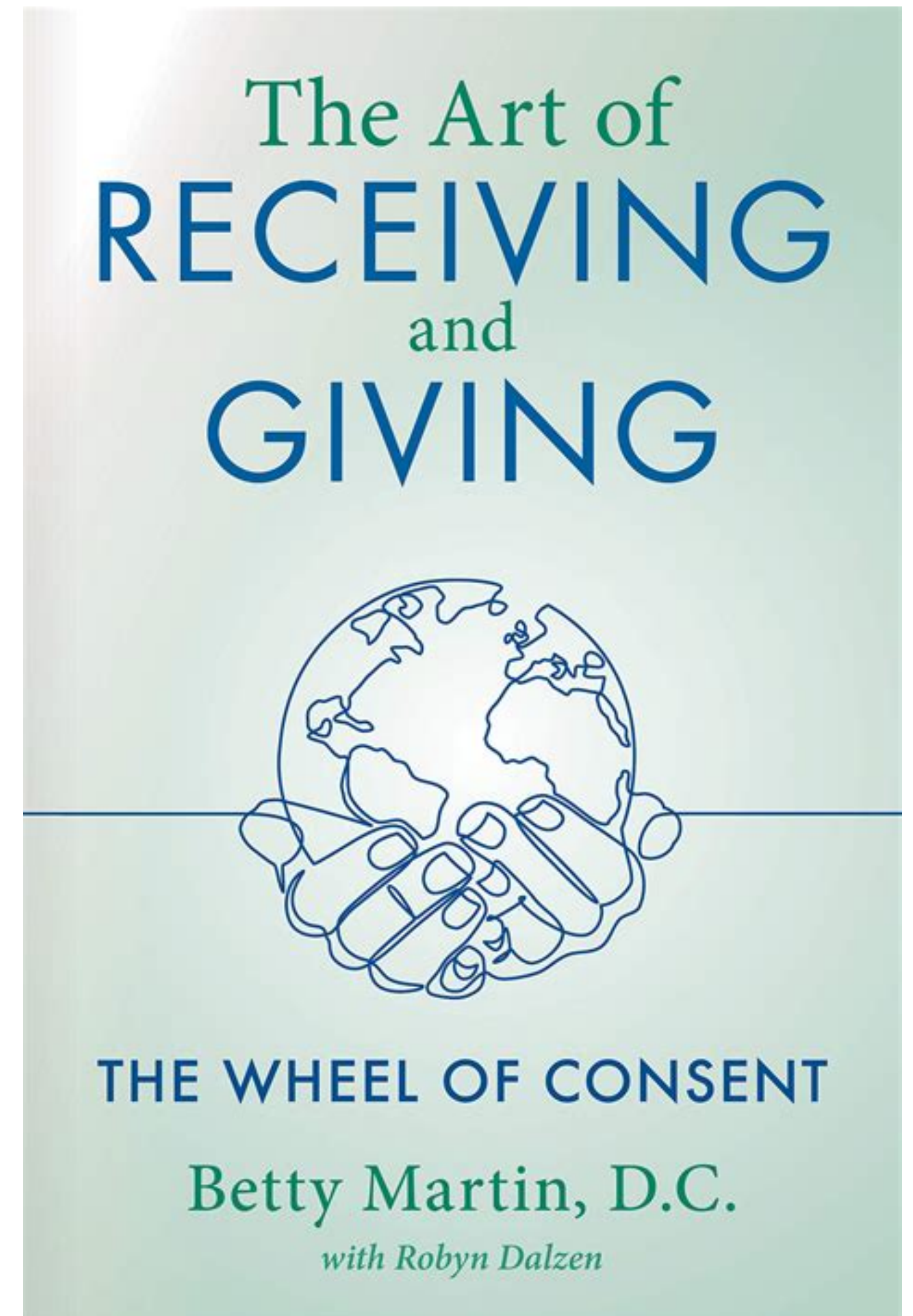
CONSENT PRACTICES



THE WHEEL OF CONSENT IN CONTACT IMPROVISATION

“Consent is not just about saying yes or no; it is about choosing.”

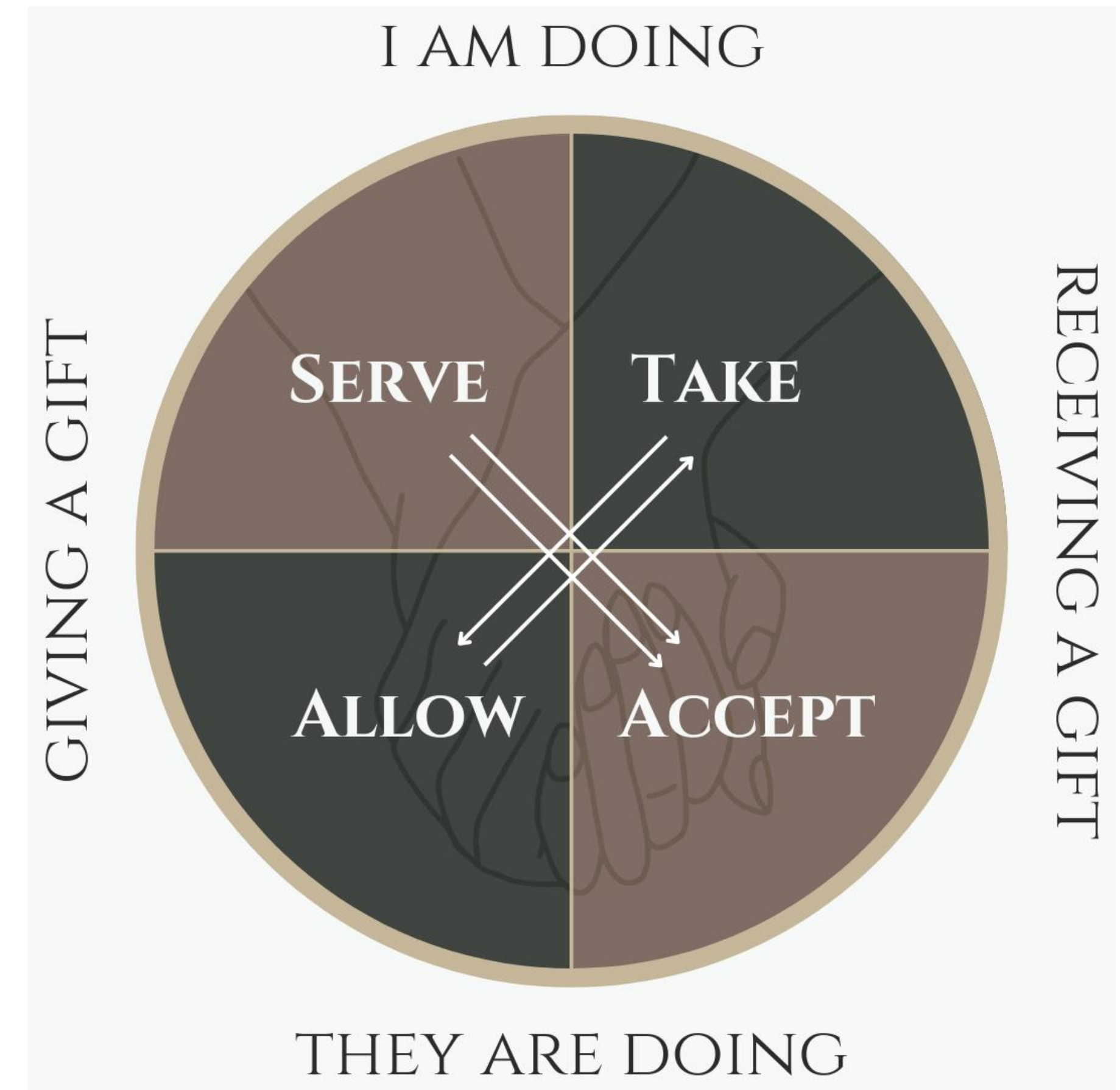
If I’m doing something because I should, because it’s expected, or because I don’t want to disappoint, that’s not choosing. If I’m doing it because I want to and can feel that desire in my body, that is choosing.” (B. Martin)



ARRIVING AT CONSENT TOGETHER

“Consent is more than agreeing to something someone else wants. Consent as an agreement that two or more people come up with together. You don’t give consent – you arrive at consent together.”

- Who is doing the action?
- Who is it for?
- What are we agreeing to?



Relevance of the Wheel of Consent to CI

Building resilience

Clarifying Touch:
Communication & Awareness
Empowering Agency

A resilient CI practitioner is not someone who never becomes overwhelmed; it is someone who can notice disconnection and find a pathway back to presence, choice, and connection.

Relevance for me as teacher:

- Helps me make CI more accessible by offering students more choices
- Creates more opportunities to negotiate consent with students
- Increase my awareness of relational dynamics by noticing subtle cues and responding appropriately.
- Become more empathetic and responsive to students' pacing and comfort levels
- Helps me exercise authority more transparently

Practicing self-consent and agency through internal observations

Awareness of internal states - emotions as part of practice

- Internal checking-in
- Grounding
- Scanning Body and Mind
- Moving from Inner Impulses





Practicing and arriving at consent together through guided touch.

- Clearly define participants' roles and intentions. (giver/receiver)
- Focus on qualities of touch:

Sensing weight and exploring range of motion in joints – to increase awareness



Building Foundations Before Complex CI

Pedagogical tools:

- self-consent and body awareness
- internal check-ins
- progressive touch exercises
- structured negotiation practices

Goal:

Develop relational awareness before complex partnering.

SYNTHESIS

Inclusive Pedagogy and Safe Discomfort

Key strategies:

- Structured consent practices
- Progressive introduction of touch
- Somatic awareness
- Clear communication
- Flexibility in teaching structure
- Empowering student choice

Conclusion

Key realization:

- Consent and touch are not in opposition
- They are mutually reinforcing.

Touch in dance can remain a powerful tool for:

- learning
- connection
- embodied awareness

when grounded in clear communication and shared agreement.

This work remains an ongoing pedagogical experiment—an inquiry into ethics, relational awareness, and the future of Contact Improvisation.

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