

Caring for the Body Is Caring for the Spirit

Sunday, July 28, 2013
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

-Songs: “Ven, Espiritu de Amor,” “Comfort Me, O My Soul,” “Touch the Earth, Reach the Sky.”

-Yoga Practice in the Service with Paige Labrie

-Reflection on a Tai Chi Contest by Lonon Smith

-Testimonies about Yoga Practice by Jerry & Patty

➤ Reflections on Chair Yoga by JoAnn Anglin

What I like is how each lesson is both dependable and surprising.

The order of the moves varies, but they still have a flow and rhythm, so it becomes like following a partner in a dance. And it ends up feeling logical, as if that is the perfect order for that day’s motions.

I walk for an hour 3 days a week, but aside from gardening and occasional house work, most of my ‘activity’ is done while sitting – writing, reading, driving, conversing or on the computer.

Then at chair yoga, I get a real sense of where my body is, and a heightened feeling of its core, the centering connection for all the other movements. And I think this helps my sense of balance overall.

Another good thing is that there is no emphasis on perfection – just an opportunity to do what you can, and maybe a little more. We are many shapes and sizes and abilities in our chair yoga class, but our instructor helps us see our possibilities – in a way, she introduces us to parts of our bodies that we didn’t realize were there.

And finally, we get reminded to breathe deeply, which is not as automatic as one would think.

And you know, another word for breathing is ‘inspiration,’ the same root from which ‘spiritual’ comes.

Pastoral Prayer and Meditation by Roger Jones

Please join with me now for a time of contemplation in words and silence.

Notice your feet on the floor and your body in the seat. Become aware of your breathing.

After these words, we will take a minute of silence, and the silence will be followed by music.

O spirit that breathes in us, we are alive!
Let us give thanks for this new day of life.

O love that moves in us, we are here.
Let us give thanks for each person around us, as they give thanks for our presence.

O ground of being, hold us and sustain us as we live each day with joys and sorrows, longings and hopes. Help us take one step at a time, living one breath at a time.

O spirit of compassion, show us the strength dwelling in our hearts, the courage to behold the tragedies and perils of our human family.... Among other events, we call to mind the ongoing strife in Syria, the killings in Egypt, the train crash in Spain.

We strive to extend our care to those who grieve or those who suffer in body, mind or spirit within these walls with us, and those far beyond these walls.

We touch this earth with gratitude for its beauty, and we are mindful of its countless inhabitants, mindful of all the forms of life on earth.

Now in the moments to come, let us be in stillness and become aware of our breathing. Aware of our neighbor’s breathing. Aware of our common breath, which is the breath of life.

Let us take some time in that silence which is more than the absence of sound but which is the source from which we all emerged and to which we eventually return. Amen.

➤ Sermon by Rev. Roger Jones

An Effort

Paige has been teaching Monday Yoga here at our church for a number of years. She also volunteers several Sundays a year in our Spirit Play religious education program. [The fees for Monday Yoga are modest, and a good value, by the way.] We appreciate the gifts of her time and attention, and her grounding in her own spiritual practice.

People attending Paige's Monday morning session at 10:00 use chairs for seated Yoga and for stability while standing—chair yoga.

On Monday night at 6:30, it's the more familiar kind of Yoga. We used to refer to these classes as Easy Yoga. Then I went to one of them! "Easy" was not my experience. So now I say, let's call it Mat Yoga, and bring a mat if you have one. Of course, when a new person enters a class, an attentive Yoga teacher like Paige will notice how the person is doing and will give extra encouragement and instructions that are more thorough.

But any kind of Yoga remains a challenge, and that is its purpose. After all, the root of word YOGA, from the ancient Sanskrit, means an *effort!* It also means a *joining*, as Paige told us. But it is an effort, and of course all disciplines do take effort.

It's the same for any spiritual practice as it is for any physical practice, whether it's an exercise workout or physical therapy. Honoring and caring for one's inner life takes intention, effort, patience, and some discipline. Honoring and caring for one's physical body also takes intention, effort, patience and some discipline.

Walking and Mindfulness

I have always enjoyed walking, and try to walk when I have that choice, such as when running an errand. Rarely do I just go for a walk as a practice for its own sake, for just slowing down and calming my spirits. But in classes on mindfulness meditation I've been taught that walking can bring us to the present moment, noticing every step, moving with intention and ease.

While walking, or even while running, we might notice our breathing, notice how the parts of the body work together. We might also notice how the ground holds us up, how the earth sustains us, and welcomes us. We might imagine the whole round earth on which we move, along with so many other beings.

If we walk with friends, children or other loved ones, we can appreciate the chance to be together, either walking briskly to get the heart pumping, or gently to slow down and take it easy—sometimes both. We can talk, and then we can walk for in silence for a time.

Whether together or alone, running or walking is a way to cultivate peace and gratitude as well as to promote our health. With mindfulness, if

we pay attention to where we're walking or running, we're less likely to fall in a hole or trip on a rock. I've done such things while running or walking, because I treated running or walking only as a way to get someplace, or only as a way to exercise.

With mindfulness, we can honor the motion of the body and see it for the miracle that it is. We can do this by walking. We can do this by any kind of exercise. We can do this by sitting still. Just by noticing the body and the breath, and giving thanks for it. If we can do anything more than sitting still--if we have the time and the ability and health to exercise regularly--we can count ourselves lucky.

Swimming and Life

The intentional exercise practice I have sustained the longest is swimming. In my mid-twenties I started going to a pool a few times a week. To be sure, there have been phases when I thought I was too busy. And I have tried other exercises—weights, treadmills, stretching, even using a professional trainer. But swimming is what I have come back to.

When I think about what happens to me in the pool, I can appreciate the spiritual experience of it... of being held by the water and buoyed up in it, of having a glimpse of a different world under water. My favorite thing during the workout is to swim the first length of the pool all underwater, on only one breath. Sometimes I can swim back, doing a second length on a second breath. When I do, I feel my arms and legs screaming for oxygen. I know I'm alive.

But I must be honest with you. I didn't start swimming as a spiritual practice. I did it because I was afraid that I would die of a heart attack at a young age, like my father. Just as when, during my 20s, I obsessively avoided salt and cholesterol, swimming laps was a fear-based habit and a fierce one, so I could stay alive. There are worse habits, aren't there!

I've done my lap swimming at various YMCA facilities in the cities in which I've lived. Many private health clubs have pools, and they may have newer, bigger facilities, but I like supporting the Y's mission of building strong kids, strong families and a strong community. I like seeing neighbors, kids and families taking care of their bodies and spirits, and taking care of one another.

Furthermore, unlike many private clubs, the

YMCA always has lifeguards to watch over us while we swim. Someday I might need one.

In my 20s and 30s, when I lived in Chicago, my habit was to stop off at the New City YMCA during my subway ride home from work. That Y was on the near north side, with towers of sad-looking public housing nearby in one direction and upscale condos, cafes and shopping centers in the other direction. At that younger age, I swam longer at a stretch than I do now, and more vigorously. I pushed myself.

In that YMCA, on the white cinderblock wall above and next to the pool, running its entire length, were painted graphics of dolphins and fish. And painted above them, in big block letters was this message: “God Loves Us!” (Exclamation point.) Perhaps it was intended for the kids from the public housing projects. Perhaps it was intended for all of us. Of course it was.

Sometimes, near the end of a workout, as I pushed myself to do a bit more, a bit faster, I’d look up and read those words. Then I would feel the energy of that affirmation in my legs and arms. I’d feel the love of life in my thumping heart, and in the breaths I was taking. God loves us! I am alive! I am so glad I can do this!

That message on the wall renewed my perspective on what I was doing. It was a reminder, a refresher. I was not only trying to forestall death by a heart attack. Not only trying to guarantee a longer life. I was alive. I was living, in that moment.

As Paige says, honoring the body, caring for the body, is honoring life.

Pain and Aging: Swimming Less

Unfortunately, in my late 30s and early 40s, I developed neck and shoulder pain while swimming. It hurt when I turned my head to breathe. For months I neglected it. I pushed on through, kept swimming. Finally the pain was sharp and chronic enough that I took several months off. After medical examinations, a cortisone injection and many treatments of physical therapy... not much progress. Finally an MRI scan showed that I have degenerative disc disease in my neck. So far I have avoided neck surgery. Since then I’ve managed my condition well enough to be able to swim. I now use a snorkel that goes right down the middle of my face, so I can breathe without turning

my head. Also, I don’t swim for as long a session as I used to, or as vigorously. I take it more easily.

At some point in my life I may not be able to swim as much as I do now. At some point I may not be able to swim at all, or even make it to a YMCA or other location for exercise.

At my current YMCA, I’ve become friendly with several of the regular swimmers and other members and staffers. We chat and visit. Sometimes we notice when a fellow member no longer comes to exercise as often as before. Then we notice, they no longer come at all. Such a decline and loss of ability is natural, unfortunately. It’s inevitable for most of us. It can be frustrating, depressing, saddening, painful.

It is my hope, as I become less able to use my body in the years to come, that I will not hate it, but will remember to honor it in thought and word, and in whatever efforts I’m still able to make.

Whatever happens, we can still honor the body that we were given. We can give thanks for it.

The march of time, the wages of chance, the inequities and unfairness of the varying conditions of life on this earth—such things can reduce the options we have. Still, we can give thanks for this gift of the body. We can honor it. To care for the body is to care for the spirit.

The body is the vessel of our mind and spirit, our channel for the life force.

Our bodies and the breathing of our bodies connect us to all other beings, to all that is. Life is a gift, and so is the body. Let us be good stewards of this good gift. So may it be, blessed be, and amen.

A Benediction by Rev. Mark L. Belletini

Go in peace.

Live simply, gently, at home in yourselves.

Act justly. Speak justly.

Remember the depth of your own compassion.

Forget not your power in the days of your powerlessness.

Do not desire to be wealthier than your peers and stint not your hand of charity.

Practice forbearance. Speak the truth, or speak not.

Take care of yourselves as bodies, for you are a good gift.

Crave peace for all people in the world, beginning with yourselves,

And go as you go with the dream of that peace alive in your heart. --#686, *Singing the Living Tradition*