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MOVEMENT, BREATHING AND CHRISTIAN MEDITATION: CATALYSTS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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Abstract

This paper describes the ongoing development of a holistic fitness course offered each semester to students at Eastern University, a small Christian school in Southeastern Pennsylvania. Using yoga, mat Pilates techniques, and a formal spiritual formation tool, students are given the opportunity to use breathing, movement, and meditation to enhance their experience of God and their Christian faith. In this paper, these elements are examined from a Christian worldview. Qualitative data from student evaluations are shared. These data demonstrate potential benefits derived from these practices to spiritual health and growth.

Preface

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
- Romans 12:1

This paper describes a fitness course where yoga and mat Pilates exercise techniques are combined with opportunities for structured faith development in the students enrolled in the course. The end of semester evaluations for this course, entitled Yoga/Pilates: Spiritual Growth Through Movement, I have realized that many students are experiencing strong, positive spiritual impacts that they attribute to this course. This paper explores ways in which course content may act as a catalyst for spiritual growth.

The process I describe here derives from my own faith journey and my own experiences as a lifelong learner. This work is therefore both personal and professional. It reflects the ways I bring together my spiritual life and my approach to teaching, and explicates how I endeavor to nurture the integration of faith and learning within my students' lives. This process becomes a circular one, as student feedback from assessments of physical, emotional and spiritual components before and after the course informs my teaching methods and my own faith journey. The cycles of teaching and learning, and of faith development and expression continue.

Introduction

When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart...
 - Jeremiah 29:13

The gymnasium seems vast, as thirty students stand poised at the edge of teal blue exercise mats. Eyes gaze slightly upward, hands press together in prayer pose as the strains of music begin. Students are guided to take a deep breath in and then release it slowly as they listen to Andrea Bocelli singing:

"I pray you'll be our eyes, and watch us where we go."
 Students begin to lift their hands above their heads...

And help us to be wise, in times when we don't know
 Taking in another deep breath they stretch upward and slightly backward...

Let this be our prayer, when we lose our way
 Releasing their breath they bend forward allowing their bodies to hang...

Lead us to the place, guide us with your grace
 With hands on the mat their right foot moves back into a lunge...

To a place where we'll be safe
 Holding this pose, students breathe deeply in and out...

I pray we'll find your light, and hold it in our hearts
 Students move their left leg back into a plank or pushup position...

When stars go out each night, let this be our prayer
 With slow breath in and out they lower slowly to the mat...

When shadows fill our day, lead us to a place
 With hands on mats they straighten arms and push torso up and out, breathing in

Guide us with your grace, give us faith so we'll be safe
 Releasing their breath, students now push hips high into downward dog pose...

We ask that life be kind, and watch us from above
 Right legs move forward into a lunge position as students breathe in...

We hope each soul will find another soul to love
 Left legs step forward as students allow their torsos to hang...

Let this be our prayer, just like every child
 Slowly, while taking in a deep breath, students roll up into a stand...

Need to find a place, guide us with your grace
 Breathing deeply, students raise hands in prayer.....

Give us faith so we'll be safe

'The Prayer', written by Foster and Sager for Quest for Camelot

Several years ago I had a vision which coincided with an expressed need here at the Christian university where I am an assistant professor of nursing. Students and alumni were concerned about a lack of fitness offerings within the curriculum. My vision was that as a teacher/nurse practitioner/fitness instructor I might be able to develop and teach an additional course that could address students as whole persons and give them ways of connecting to God through their physical beings as well as through their cognitive and affective selves. Committed to helping people learn to care for themselves, and knowing that college students are a particularly stressed group of individuals who are in need of self-care, I wanted to give them more tools to calm their bodies and minds and to assist them in connecting with God. I knew from personal experience with sacred dance that my well being was enhanced by using my body as part of my worship as well as to express my joy of living. Experiencing enhancement of personal healing and growth as a person of Christian faith through the practice of yoga, I wanted to share this practice with others. I had found a wonderful tool to help me achieve what the psalm suggests: "Be still and know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:10). In addition, through practicing movement and breathing techniques on a regular basis, I was experiencing what Psalm 131 expresses:

Oh Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother my soul is like the weaned child that is with me

I've improved my ability to "let go" and experience calmness in spite of the complexities of life, and these tools of breathing, movement and meditation have helped me physically and enhanced my faith walk.

With support from faculty in the Biokinetics and Dance Departments, my vision for this type of course quickly became a reality. The course "Pilates and Yoga: Movement as Spiritual Practice" was born, and will be offered for the sixth consecutive semester in the fall of 2003. It is open to all undergraduate students as an elective, with enrollment capped at 25 students. The course has been oversubscribed each semester, and all majors have been represented among the students enrolled.

The movements detailed at the beginning of this paper describe a typical opening sun salutation (so named because it is typically performed in the morning) which is intended to stretch every muscle group throughout the body, develop concentration and balance, and stimulate endocrine glands, cardiac, respiratory and digestive systems (Birch, 2000). It is rare that I don't feel deeply moved as I watch the students execute their sun salutation sequence of movements along with uplifting and inspiring music.

The course takes a didactic approach to content for the first twenty to thirty minutes of each class. Anatomy and physiology, history and theoretical aspects of these approaches to exercise are addressed. In addition, nutrition and stress response/reduction are discussed. This is followed by an hour-long experiential component including a workout and a twenty minute relaxation period.

From my point of view, our university's holistic mission of "the whole Gospel for the whole world" requires that persons be embraced and developed as total mind-body-spirit beings. We are encouraged to search for God "with all our heart" in the scripture. To me this means we reach for God with body and soul, and that we place various means of enacting this search at the disposal of the Holy Spirit, asking God to bless our actions in a way that makes the truth in them useful in our lives. According to Zeiders et al (2001):

Christian Holism encourages exploring diverse approaches to healing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Healing practices from other cultures such as yoga, meditation... (and) breath work are seen as potentially useful and potentially revealing of ways in which God made living beings. Nothing exists to prevent the Spirit from arranging our thinking about and use of various healing systems in a way that pleases God and blesses our clients... God is as sovereign over Biblical Counseling as over yoga. Truth from any of these healing practices has a place in the Kingdom of God and in Christian Holism... So, while Christian Holism is concerned with integration of secular and revealed knowledge, what we are more concerned with is putting the things developed in the secular world, or even in other religious systems, under Jesus' Lordship for his use (p.19-20).

As a teacher of yoga on a Christian campus, I have thought a great deal about the philosophical underpinnings of the practice, of potential risks as well as potential usefulness to our students. I have felt a sense of confidence about trusting Jesus to be with us in our workouts as we use aspects of yogic practice, not only because I pray for this, but because of the fruits of the Spirit I see revealed each semester. Through reading student papers, hearing their verbal feedback, and reading class evaluations (see Appendix A), it has become clear to me that this course has made a positive difference in the lives of many students. I am always curious to see how God continues to reveal truth to us through all the experiences of our lives, and so I remain aware and open to God's leading.

There are three aspects of Yoga practice that are used in this course and that will be explored as part of this paper: movement/postures; breath control; and relaxation/meditation. Though different, strong similarities exist between yoga and Pilates such as emphasis on exacting body alignment, development of strength and flexibility, and the use of breathing. These commonalities allow for a natural fusion of the two approaches, and make for a more interesting, productive and satisfying workout.

In ancient as well as modern texts, yoga is most frequently translated as "to yoke" (Hewitt, 1977; Birch, 2000). This yoking can refer to the connection between body and mind/spirit within individuals, as well as to the connection between God and man. In fact, the specific sequence of postures and special breathing techniques practiced in yoga were originally designed to calm the body and still the mind for receptivity to God through meditation (Ryan, 1995). The use of a range of breathing techniques as well as the emphasis on relaxation/meditation at the end of the workout are characteristic of yoga, and increase the potential for deriving mind-body-spirit benefits from the workout.

Breath

Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew... breathe on me, breath of God, till I am wholly thine, till all this earthly part of me glows with thy fire divine.

Johann Martin Spiess in the Episcopalian hymnal

Breath is the very tangible link with our God which enlivens us as we literally *in-spire* or take in the Holy Spirit! We take in the Holy Spirit and are then inspired to creativity and vibrant life. We can live without food for weeks and without water for days, but without-breath we would die within minutes. Truly, breath is our most immediate evidence of the bond between spirit and flesh, creator and created!

When we vary breathing patterns, we literally cause physiologic changes in the body which can influence our cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes in positive ways. For example,

a growing body of research in of psychoneuroimmunology has demonstrated the linkages between breathing and pain control within the human body. An area of the brain near the third and fourth ventricles called the periaqueductal gray (PAG) is rich with receptors for pain control substances. It is also where key respiratory centers are located. Researchers are now establishing clear links between breathing and mood states. By varying the rate and depth of our respirations, we can literally alter our mood as well as our experience of pain (Pert, 1997). An example of this is the use of special breathing techniques to reduce pain and anxiety during childbirth. What we have known through experience can now be explained within our traditional scientific frameworks.

God has given us a powerful tool in our breath. In yoga we learn to manipulate this function to benefit our body-mind. By breathing fully, we remove any subtle distractions secondary to an underlying sense of physiologic alarm. By calming our nervous systems and soothing our cells with oxygen, a part of us opens to God in readiness and joy. By using our breathing as a transitional focal point as well as a physiologic relaxation tool, we can shift our body and mind into stillness where we are more ready and receptive to prayer. This concept is best grasped through experience, so I invite the reader to pause here and take a deep diaphragmatic breath - hold it to the count of 5 - then exhale and say to yourself "God is with me". Try this again. What do you notice right now?

An exercise that is very effective for students is to have them breathe through The Lord's Prayer. As they take a slow and complete breath in, they say to themselves "Our father, who art in heaven"...and as they breathe out slowly and fully they continue "hallowed be thy name"...and with the next in breath, "thy kingdom come"...and with the out-breath "thy will be done"...and so forth. This can be a powerfully calming and soulful way to pray, and can facilitate a shift into a more deeply receptive state of being.

Movement

In him we live and move and have our being
– Acts 17:28

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us
– John 1:14

Through my practice as a nurse over the past 25 years, I have observed ways in which people relate to their bodies. So many have never experienced their bodies in positive ways. Early childhood messages and socialization, as well as the influences of media and advertising, can all work to erode a positive body image. Our bodies are more than just a container for our souls. God chose to come to us as our embodied Christ, giving us an experience of union with the infinite while still in our finite bodies. According to scripture, this incarnate God enjoyed aspects of being in human form. He was thankful for food, wine, oils on his skin, bodily contact, children, pain, and laughter, and he forever dignified our fleshly state.

In his book *Prayer of Heart and Body*, Thomas Ryan (1995) highlights the tensions and lessons evident in our two central doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection:

The one, in which God chose to call human bodiliness "home," - "and the other, in which that broken, weary body is not discarded but re-embraced and taken into the very life of

the Trinity for all eternity – we could do better at helping people to embrace and relate positively to their enspirited flesh as a joyful mode of existence! (p. 7).

Is it possible that there is wisdom that can only be perceived through bodily experience? Within the discipline of nursing, as within all disciplines, patterns of knowing have been identified and examined as they pertain to professional encounters. Epistemology is the study of the theory of knowledge (Schultz & Meleis, 1988). In epistemology there are several basic types of knowledge and ways of grasping knowledge, including empirics, esthetics, ethical, and personal knowledge. Of interest here are those types of knowledge that differ from our primary focus on empirics throughout most of our education, including somatic knowledge, metaphysical knowledge, and intuitive knowledge. The value of non-conscious pattern recognition, feelings and hunches, bodily sensations and experiences, miracles, and extrasensory perceptions are contained in these ways of knowing. There is much information and wisdom to be gained by living fully as an embodied soul.

Yoga can provide an additional means through which to experience God. With gentle stretching and pushing of the body, deep and rhythmic breathing patterns, and an accepting environment, new avenues of self-discovery and appreciation for the Creator open. Under the influence of the writings of the apostle Paul, Augustine and Descartes, many people experience a true *disconnect with and/or devaluation of* their embodied selves. (A full discussion of this is not within the scope of this paper, however the work of Damasio and Hunt is interesting on this topic and is included in the references). While the Trinity is the ultimate model for this mind-body-spirit synergy, many Christian upbringings do not include the notion of the Trinity, nor do they always include affirmations regarding the embodied aspects of self, and the inherent potential to know aspects of God through our physicality.

The student's written evaluations at the end of each semester confirm that deep yet previously unconscious alienation which can result from negative experiences in secular and religious socialization and specific life experiences can also be ameliorated through practicing yoga, (see Appendix A). Many of them express a sense of discovery, relief and hope when they experience their minds, bodies and spirits as connected aspects of self. Many share a sense of joy as they discover another means through which they can experience and worship God.

Comments in praise of the course abound:

"I feel more connected to God through my body. It [the course] has been spiritually uplifting and I sleep better";

"I have found new ways to focus on God by breathing and relaxing";

"I feel more whole. I never saw my body as a good thing- something to use for God, to be thankful for what He has given me. I'm thankful for the ability to move";

"I feel better in my body. I have begun to experience God through exercise. My prayer life has increased and become more meaningful";

"You're not only stretching and strengthening your body but your mind as well...even your heart (spiritually speaking). I stand in awe of God! He has truly and wonderfully made each of us. This course has only enhanced that belief".

Adding a physical exercise can boost the benefits of prayer, as described at the beginning of

this paper. Saying the Lord's Prayer in short phrases with coordinated breathing and movement can make for a completely different prayer experience. By engaging more than one sense, the potential for absorbing and being transformed by the words can increase. Only in recent times have technologic advances allowed us to view brain functioning in ways that enable links to be made between affective, cognitive, and spiritual functioning (Ash, Crist, Salisbury, Dewell, & Boivin, 1996). These methods have illuminated brain activity during, among other things, affective states, prayer, meditation, breathing, and religious experience. Christians face the task of interpreting and integrating the information gleaned from such technology with theological views of people. According to Boivin (2003), "The traditional dualistic or pluralistic views in terms of the mind/body problem must be put aside if a Christian view of the person is to incorporate reasonably the full methodological, technological, and philosophical implications of ...biomedical advance into an effective and useful understanding of human nature and the human condition" (p. 166). Yoga was developed and understood by people in ancient times to prepare the body and mind for encounter with God. This practice can now be examined in new ways – to expand our perspectives on the nature of the journey toward God.

Christian Meditation

I rise before dawn and cry for help; I put my hope in your words. My eyes are awake before each watch of the night, that I may meditate on your promise

– Psalm 119: 147-148

Meditation is an essential component of yoga practice, and has been problematic for many Christians to understand and embrace because we know it today as a practice developed in a non-Christian culture for the purpose of spiritual growth. When developing this course, I decided to call the twenty minute relaxation period at the end of each yoga/pilates session “relaxation time.” I didn’t want concern and fear surrounding a concept that had an Eastern flavor to deprive students of a truly essential component of their workout. The preceding physical exercise and breathing are designed to ready the mind and heart for insight and closeness with God, and it would be a shame not to offer students the opportunity for the full spiritual benefits of this modality. It is during this quiet time that the opportunities for real spiritual growth can be developed.

In her book, *Sweat Your Prayers*, Gabrielle Roth (1997) reflects on Einstein’s observation that he always got his best ideas in the morning while shaving: Shaving is like meditation with a sharp object. When the mind is empty and receptive, big ideas flow through every cell of our body. When we’re thinking too hard, we tense up and nothing can flow through us; our energy gets stuck in our heads “(p. 39).

Though many of us picture diaper-clad men sitting cross-legged when we think of yogic meditation, the reality is that any number of activities can transport us to that still, relaxed yet alert state. For some it may be knitting or jogging, for others it is fly-fishing, listening to music or watching a sunset.

Psychologists and physicians are discovering the health benefits of meditation. Research shows it is one of the better therapeutic modalities for panic and anxiety disorders, substance abuse, chronic pain, depression, ulcers, colitis, psoriasis, hypertension, insomnia, and arthritis (Novey, 2000). Nurse researchers Lawson and Horneffer (2002) piloted a 12-week program of movement, breathing and meditation to a group of 11 adults and measured psychological, spiritual, physical and emotional functioning before and after the program. Using the 16-item Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (Underwood, 1999), participants reported significant increases in daily spiritual experiences. In addition, sense of life purpose, satisfaction, and confidence during stressful situations were improved. Physical and psychological symptoms were decreased, and significant (positive) changes were found for creativity, authenticity, openness to experience, relationships, relaxation and self-care, self-reflection, joy for life, and overall health. Without doubt, a daily practice of quiet sitting or movement, where one is focused in the here and now and where one’s mind is quiet and receptive, is beneficial for the health of the body-mind-spirit.

There is a rich tradition of meditation within Christianity. In the deserts of Egypt in the early fourth century, Christian monastic communities prayed the Jesus Prayer, which is a combination of passages from the New Testament (Luke. 18:38 and Luke. 9:13). This has a long version, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner” and a short version, “Jesus, mercy.” This prayer is repeated endlessly and serves as a “mantra,” –a word or phrase that can be repeated rhythmically and used as a focus that evokes feelings of peace, calm, and faith (Ryan, 1995). This Prayer spread geographically as well as temporally, and though

once a staple in Eastern Christian communities, it is now widely used in Western Christian communities, especially those interested in contemplation.

In more modern times, several Trappist and Benedictine monks have revived and encouraged the use of meditation for Christians as an important tool for spiritual development. Referring to meditation as *contemplation*, Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating and others talked about the ability to enter one's own center of being (or heart) and passing through it into the very center (heart) of God. Indeed, the Jesus Prayer is often called the 'prayer of the heart' (Merton, 1949).

In the Quaker tradition, the idea of stillness and quiet has long been a part of the daily experience of God as well as the foundation for communal worship. In his book, *A Testament of Devotion*, Thomas Kelly wrote,

"The last fruit of holy obedience is the simplicity of the trusting child. It is the simplicity that lies beyond complexity - a deeper, internal simplification of one's personality, stilled, quieted, tranquil, in child like trust listening ever to Eternity's whisper, walking with a smile into the dark... This amazing simplification comes when we 'center down,'" "when life is lived with singleness of eye, from a holy center where the breath and stillness of Eternity are heavy upon us and we are wholly yielded to God" (p. 45 & 46).

In the book *Meditating on the Word* (1986), Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the benefits and necessity of allowing God's Word to permeate our consciousness by allowing ourselves to deeply contemplate fragments of scripture in solitude. He said the following,

"I do not treasure God's promise in my understanding but in my heart. It is not to be analysed by my intellect, but to be pondered in my heart... Therefore, it is never sufficient simply to have read God's Word. It must penetrate deep within us, dwell in us, like the Holy of Holies in the Sanctuary, so that we do not sin in thought, word, or deed" (p. 9).

Bonhoeffer emphasizes the need for quiet and stillness to accomplish this, but he does not give specific tools to help us achieve this calm state. Breathing, movement and meditation are tools which help us achieve this stillness of body and mind, and increased receptivity for meditating on the word.

When we enter into new territories through meditation, we may encounter unanticipated dangers along with the rewards. Though we often talk and think about the nonphysical realm, few of us have ever been given instructions about how to enter into experiencing it, let alone shielding ourselves from harm during an encounter. Potential dangers could include the risk of stirring up thoughts and emotions that have been suppressed or somehow ignored. In the quiet stillness of meditation these could become more consciously perceived, and could be upsetting. Some Christians may perceive these uncomfortable feelings and/or disturbing thoughts as deriving from an external, evil force. Such persons would likely feel vulnerable and fearful about potential evil influence while in the receptive meditative state. Much of this anxiety derives from our lack of familiarity and experience with being tuned in to our innermost thoughts and feelings. Each night when we go to sleep we are letting go of a measure of conscious mental control. Are we vulnerable at this time to evil influence? Do we pray for protection each night as we fall asleep? All things are in God, and God is in all things. So, too, can God be in the process of entering into silence. Nonetheless, if one feels anxious about meditation, it is better not to do it without the support of a spiritual instructor.

Tools for self-protection as one enters into silence can include asking God to be present, imagining that one is surrounded by divine protective light, or that one is surrounded by a shield that is stronger than any evil force. Intention is critical, and I think it is important to ask God to be present in the process every time one enters into a deeply meditative state. “We need to realize that when we face this dark side of spirituality, we are following Jesus and the early church. They continually prayed to be delivered from the evil one “(Kelsey, 1995, p. 93). At the beginning of class, I invite God to be with and in us as we move, breathe, and lie quietly (see Appendix B).

Why then, since there are risks involved with entering into silence, would we dare to seek this type of experience? In *The Other Side of Silence*, Morton Kelsey beautifully explores meditation in relation to the psychology of religious experience as well as the religious aspects of our psychological selves. He believes that to separate out these aspects of self is a false compartmentalization. To examine our lives through several lenses can lead to greater emotional and physical health, and to true spiritual wholeness. To be unaware of our inner motivations and issues can lead to unsatisfactory relationships, and even to destructive patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior. According to Kelsey, meditation can be the most important means by which to truly examine inner aspects of the spiritual self:

Most of the people I have known need this relationship with the spiritual world more than they realized...Many of the medieval writers on the life of the spirit warn against too much concern with the images of this inner world. The men and women emerging from the Dark Ages were too close to the unconscious and needed their enthusiasm curbed. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila are classical examples of this emphasis. Our world, however, faces a different problem. It fails to reveal that most of humankind’s great religions are essentially ways of showing people their way in the inner world and then bringing the reality of divine love to other human beings” (p. 94-95).

Kelsey suggests that by venturing into the terrain of our inner world, there is the possibility of encountering divine love. Any opportunities to encounter tangible divine love are most appealing to me, and I would add that I have experienced this love through dreams, worship experiences, connections with other people, music, and nature as well as through contemplation.

I also believe that “From him and through him and in him are all things “ (Romans 11:36). To me, this scripture means that Christ is in my movement, my breath, and the silence I invite at the end of my yoga sessions.

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in She ol, you are there...If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night, “even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. “

– Psalm 139: 7-12

These words are reassuring as we cautiously explore experiences that may lie outside of our zone of the comfortable and familiar, yet might be exactly where we need to be.

When we quiet the chatter of our minds, when we stop praying and talking *to* and *at* God, what might we hear? What might we receive from God if we take the time to just *be* in God’s presence? I have moved away from calling this time *relaxation* and I don’t lean toward using the term *meditation* either. I prefer to call it *receptive prayer* time. We are *with* God, not expecting, grasping, doing, begging, or praising. Just being *with* God- trusting and ready to

receive. I believe God honors this attempt at relationship. Again, judging from student responses, many are experiencing wonderful benefits from this practice (see Appendix A).

Because of time constraints I only allow twenty minutes for this portion of the class. My greatest surprise the first time I taught the course was that I expected the students to feel a bit uncomfortable with lying on their backs in silence, listening to soft instrumental music at the end of each class period. I assumed they would not understand the importance of it, especially in the context of a fitness course. As they experienced it however, they understood its significance in a deeply personal way, and on the mid-semester course evaluations, they raved about the relaxation time. Comments from student evaluations included

“Meditation has helped me to focus more on God”;

“I’m feeling more at peace with myself. I like to think about God and my life while meditating, and I think I’m praising God for my body while I’m doing the physical exercises”;

“I like the relaxation time afterwards because I can meditate on God and connect with Him spiritually;”

“This class has done amazing things for me! Overall (emotionally, physically, spiritually) I am a lot more healthy. A lot of people have even mentioned that to me! I can feel God’s peace inside of me, too. It’s a beautiful feeling”;

“I feel stronger and more at peace even during crazy busy weeks after taking this class”.

A note about choosing music: I like using *entrainment music* during these relaxation periods. This type of music is free of lyrics and recognizable harmonic progressions. This prevents unwanted, distracting musical associations during the relaxation time, and this type of music is designed to facilitate brain wave patterns into a relaxed yet alert alpha – theta state. It is readily available in most music stores.

Spiritual formation

The whole purpose of spiritual direction is to ...bring out [our] inner spiritual freedom, [our] inmost truth, which is what we call the likeness of Christ in our] soul’
– Thomas Merton (1960)

The first time I taught this course I had students use the relaxation time for prayer, listening for God’s leading in their lives. I offered them the following piece of scripture to focus on, *should they want to*: “Be still and know that I am God. “ This was our mantra. Later, as I gained experience with this process, I would sometimes share a piece of scripture like this for them to ponder, but for the most part it was a non-prescriptive, non-directed process.

When the course was offered a second time, the evaluations revealed that students were deriving significant benefits to their spiritual lives (See Appendix A). I was inspired to use this time of quiet receptivity more intentionally as fertile soil for cultivating and nurturing spiritual development. I was hoping to maximize the potential for spiritual growth through manipulating the course content. Saint Teresa of Avila taught that those who were faithful to prayer could expect in a relatively short time – six months to a year – to be led into a prayer of quiet. One of the signs that St. John of the Cross pointed to as an indication that one is ready for

imageless prayer is that prayer using thoughts and images no longer feels “right.. “ In fact, “you become aware of a growing contentment to remain alone in loving awareness of God, in interior peace, quiet and repose, without the kind of prayer exercises in which one progresses mentally from point to point. You prefer to remain only in general loving awareness, without particular knowledge or understanding “ (Ryan, 1995, p. 41 & 55).

With inspiration from *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction* (Anderson and Reese, 1999), I formalized an approach to nurturing spiritual development to be used in conjunction with the 20 minute relaxation time at the end of each class. Relying heavily on Anderson and Reese’s book, I identified the common threads in the teachings of Ignatius, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Jeanne Guyon, and used them to structure the following tool for nurturing spiritual growth within the context of the Yoga course.

Spiritual formation tool

The following guidelines represent a process for using scripture, breathing, and stillness of body and mind for the purpose of spiritual growth and healing. Greater insight and wisdom are sought through the use of selected religious readings and questions for reflection. Because we have just experienced a series of physical exercises along with deep breathing, we are in a state of calmness and heightened receptivity. By using the readings and questions to focus our mind, we then *let go of these cognitive processes* and allow ourselves to listen for Divine leadings, as well as inner wisdom which may come into consciousness as we lie in stillness.

In his book *Meditating on the Word*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that we read scriptural passages even just short pieces, and that we then let them sink in to our inner beings – that we allow them to dwell in us as we reflect slowly and deeply upon them. Other great spiritual mentors have suggested that we use scripture as a way to draw close to God, and then that we adopt an expectant, open attitude as we wait on God – silently allowing God to commune with us as that still, small voice within which can only be discerned when we quiet our busy minds. Let’s practice this together as we use pieces of scripture and reflective questions to set the stage for our quiet receptivity.

Weeks 1 and 2: Connecting breath and imagery

We will begin to practice relaxation, focusing on deep, abdominal breathing. During the in-breath we can focus on a positive word such as “peace “, “love “or “Jesus. “ During the out-breath we can focus on a negative word such as “fear, “anxiety “or “doubt. “ The idea is that we can *take in* affirming, desirable thoughts and feelings, and *release* any unwanted, negative thoughts and feelings. This type of breathing and imagery changes us physiologically as well as spiritually.

Weeks 3 and 4: Receptivity through stillness

During these weeks we will focus on the phrase “*Be still and know that I am God.* “ Being able to quiet our minds will be a vital tool for increasing our receptivity to God’s leading in our lives. Teresa of Avila said, “The important thing is not to think much but to love much. “ Prayer is active and requires *doing*. Here, we want to practice *being* with God. This ability to enter into quiet receptivity will also prepare us for the Ignatian disciplines to come during the next few months, where we will pose questions to ourselves, and then listen quietly for divine wisdom. Jesus said, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness* “(Mt. 5:6). To be hungry and thirsty of heart is to be ready to receive. To desire to take in more of that which is uplifting and for the greater good is divine, and it is *this* that we are encouraging in our approach to the disciplines.

Weeks 5 and 6: Clearing the path

John the Baptist said, “*Make straight the way of the Lord!*” How can we clear the path to our heart? Is there debris along the way that needs to be removed or let go? Do we have habits, grudges, memories, ways we look at ourselves, ways we look at others, or old dreams which no longer serve us or our greater purpose? Can we envision letting go of them, or leaving them behind as we move forward on our journey? Do we need to forgive, or to seek forgiveness? If we can seek true empathy with others as Christ modeled for us, we can learn to forgive more easily. Ultimately, we forgive not so much for the sake of others, but for our own sake. We *need* to forgive in order to heal on all levels of our being.

Weeks 7 and 8: Looking back

During this time we will begin to look back over our life journeys thus far. In what ways have we been blessed? In what ways have we been challenged? In what ways have we changed our viewpoints? In what ways have we grown? In what ways have we avoided growth? In what ways have we used painful experiences to help us learn? In what ways have we allowed painful experiences to harden our hearts, or allowed ourselves to withdraw from relationship and trust in God and others?

...Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

– Colossians 3:12-15

Weeks 9 and 10: Looking through past experiences

During these weeks we will begin to look through our past experiences, searching for deeper meanings that emerge with reflection. Stilling our minds with the help of our breathing, we ask God to help us see any important patterns in our lives. Is there a repeating script that emerges as we ponder this? Are there purposes and teachings that have been given to us? In what ways do we want to respond to these new learnings? Can we begin to re-frame our life experiences in light of a larger picture where all that we have known takes on a rich sense of purpose in relation to God's plans for us?

Weeks 11 and 12: Looking forward

Now we will look forward as we seek God's direction in our lives. Is there a “still, small voice” inside you that is speaking to you? Are there feelings, thoughts, and actions that you want to change in your life? Are there habits that no longer serve you and your greater purpose? What would you like your life to look like? What kinds of relationships would you like to have? How do you envision the best use of your time? What would you like to accomplish? What would you like to have others say about you at the end of your earthly life? How is God empowering you to do this? What resources has God given to you? Are you using them fully? Correctly? Wisely? With love and thanks?

Weeks 13 and 14: Looking around

We now focus on looking around to see the resources that God has given us for the journey. What people (both individuals and groups) have been placed in your life? Are there friends, relatives, teachers, congregations, and strangers who will work with you as you become the fullest expression of God's loving purpose for you? Are there people who, because they create difficulty for you, could be your greatest teachers? Are there people who, because of their compassion and acceptance of you are expressions of God's love in your world? Are you appreciative of all of these resources in your life? Are there ways you can partner more closely

with those in your community for encouragement, prayer, emotional and material support? (*Material* meaning tangible, ie if one of your friends is exhausted, instead of just sympathizing with her or praying for her, sometimes it's appropriate to do something more tangible such as do her laundry. This may speak volumes to her about God's care for her – perhaps more than any words could).

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE STRUCTURED SPIRITUAL FORMATION TOOL

Prior to teaching this course for the first time, I developed a Likert scale questionnaire to measure before and after data on physical well-being, emotional well-being and spiritual responses to this class. (See Appendix C.) When administering the “after” questionnaire, I also include 3 open-ended questions to get a sense of the spiritual, emotional and physical impacts of the course. While I have not validated this instrument, it gives me a sense of students' experiences in these areas.

I was particularly curious to analyze data pertaining to spiritual growth in the semesters since instituting this formal Spiritual Formation tool, and to compare it with data from the first two times the course was offered without this formal component. Though my data analysis process is informal and lacks the validations of internal and external validity, it gives an overall sense of the class response to spiritual formation content. The data were examined in aggregate form, as the same group of students completed the Likert scale questionnaire and answered the open-ended questions before and after. Data pertaining to question #12 on the Likert scale (“Through being in and using my body, I feel more connected to God”) indicated that approximately 50% of students had moved in the direction of more connectedness to God by the end of the course the first time I taught it, as compared to only 30% in the second and third times. In the fourth semester, the percentage of students experiencing spiritual growth increased to 60%. To try to identify whether the formal tool had anything to do with spiritual growth, the students were asked to comment on it specifically in the qualitative evaluations. About 60% of the students stated that they found the tool was very helpful for them. The other 40% were neutral toward the tool.

It is difficult to interpret this data. Small sample size is a problem because with the second and third groups fewer students completed the after scale than the before scale (21 and 22 out of 26 and 27, respectively), whereas I had 100% response the first time and fourth time around on the after scale. This discrepancy between before and after sample size could cause significant changes in results. For example, had there been 2 more students responding positively to the after scale in the third class offering, it would have raised the percent of students feeling more connected to God to 40%. Many other factors could also occur coincidentally over the course of a semester which could affect student's feelings of connectedness to God.

The qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions asked at the end of each semester (see Appendix A) give much richer insights into the students' spiritual experience of this class. Over all four semesters the responses indicate that students derive comparable spiritual benefits from the course to the same degree with no apparent amplification secondary to using the formal Spiritual Formation Tool.

It is intriguing to ponder why students responses on the Likert did not reflect a clear difference in degree of spiritual response when an intentional, structured spiritual formation format was used. Certainly the class is different each time. The student-student dynamic as well as the instructor-student interaction can vary and account for differences in responses. There are also factors going on outside of class for each student that could influence their feelings of closeness to God and that could account for their responses. This is very difficult to interpret, however, and to determine if it is the movement, music, class discussions, environment, receptive prayer time, etc...in and of themselves which contribute to the difference here, rather than to the factor of cognitively structuring the experience. Perhaps a structured approach is actually a hindrance to the students' process of going within to their own hearts, and thus to the heart of God. As spiritual mentor Jeanne Guyon suggested :

“Go straight to the heart!...Teach a believer to seek God within his own heart. First, read a passage of scripture. Once you sense the Lord's presence, the content of what you have read is no longer important. The Scripture has served its purpose; it has quieted your mind; it has brought you to Him”.

Could it be that because faith requires a cognitive leap and is, by its very nature, much less an intellectual experience than an organic one, that it should be pursued in more holistic ways? According to Johnston in his book *Christian Zen* (1971),

Christians should think more about the role of the body in prayer. After all, there is a lot to be said for beginning meditation where you are... Many will call into question the existence of God... or life after death, but only extremists will call in question the existence of their own body. So why not begin with something they believe in, and through the body go out to the cosmos and to God? In this way, meditation can be taught to people who have little faith... such people can sit and breathe... people who begin to search in this way eventually find God...the great being in whom we live, move, and are...(p. 69).

My hope is that by taking this course, more students will come to know themselves as embodied souls – indeed as ensouled bodies, and that they will experience more about themselves as whole children of God. In so doing, they may find added strength and peace in body and soul to serve others and their God with abundant joy.

Just as individuals have their own dominant ways of taking in and processing information, so too there are predominant and individualized means by which we experience and express faith. For some it may be through their intellect, for others through their affective realm, for some through the arts, and for still others through their bodies. All of these many ways of experiencing and knowing are valid and should be honored as we interact with students and each other (Schultz & Meleis, 1988).

In spite of the rich tradition of meditation within Christian contexts, many Christians will no doubt continue to be concerned about using techniques such as yoga that stem from non-Christian cultures. The great theologian C. S. Lewis understood the value of opening oneself to God through the practice of silence, as well as the influence of the body on the life of the spirit. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis imagines an epistolary relationship between an agent of the devil (Uncle Screwtape) and his apprentice demon, Wormwood, who is trying to keep a human on the road to hell. In one of the letters, Screwtape offers advice as to next steps since Wormwood's "patient" has, to his great dismay, become a Christian. He warns Wormwood to keep his "patient" from praying by

encouraging him to remember, or to think he remembers, the parrot-like nature of his prayers in childhood. In reaction against that, he may be persuaded to aim at something entirely spontaneous, inward, informal, and unregularised; and what this will actually mean to a beginner will be an effort to produce in himself a vaguely devotional *mood* in which real concentration of will and intelligence have no part. One of their poets, Coleridge, has recorded that he did not pray 'with moving lips and bended knees' but merely 'composed his spirit to love' and indulged a 'sense of supplication'. That is exactly the sort of prayer we want; and since it bears a superficial resemblance to the prayer of silence as practiced by those who are very far advanced in the Enemy's service, clever and lazy patients can be taken in by it for quite a long time. At the very least they can be persuaded that the bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must always remember, that they are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls. It is funny how mortals always picture us putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out (p. 15-16).

As I read this excerpt, I note Lewis' gentle mocking of Coleridge while at the same time he honors the silence of contemplation practiced by so many. I wonder how we can possibly evaluate which is the "better" of the many approaches to prayer... certainly only God knows our inner hearts, and we can only speculate as to what pleases God the most. Jesus taught us to pray The Lord's Prayer, and he also modeled a contemplative approach to seeking closeness with God. We are created as embodied souls. Surely there is benefit in using fully, wisely, sincerely, and intentionally that which we are given as we seek communion with our creator God.

Whether or not Lewis or we believe in evil personified, it will certainly be difficult for evil influences to get the best of us if we are solidly grounded in our true connection to God. The stimulation in the world around us and the anxious chatter in our own minds can divert us and block our ability to let the good things of God in. When we are not fully receptive and aware, our experience of divine connection and authentic peace can be diminished. Movement, breathing and meditation in a Christian context can add to our repertoire of strategies to help us create space for God in our body-mind-spirits. These strategies provide concrete means to seek God and find peace in our daily lives which are, after all, journeys of faith.

A student's experience

The report that follows this article was written by a former student in my yoga/Pilates course. While Scott is certainly a special person, and his story is particularly compelling, students frequently share their stories of insight and healing with me, and to see course content becoming such a vibrant and meaningful part of their lives is gratifying. These moments represent a fulfillment of my vision, and an affirmation that to authentically share my own journey of faith and lifelong learning with my students as whole persons is, for me, to be on a right path.

APPENDIX A

Qualitative evaluation data pertaining to **spirituality only** (other comments related to physical and emotional benefits have been left out for the purposes of this paper). The questions asked were:

Qualitative questions

What differences (if any) has this course made in your life?

What differences (if any) has this course made to your physical, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being?

Student responses

This has given me another place for devotional time.

I have learned to breathe to help my emotional and spiritual health.

I feel more connected to God through my body. It has been spiritually uplifting and I sleep better.

I feel peace, mind-body-spirit unity. This class improved my stress levels and well-being.

Helped me to connect the spiritual more with the physical.

Meditation has helped me to focus more on God.

Spiritually I have found new ways to focus on God by breathing and relaxing.

I feel a closeness with God while doing Yoga. This experience has been a positive, uplifting one. It has helped me to gain more peace and solitude and to focus on the simple and beautiful things around me.

This course helped me through a difficult time- God is good! Emotionally and spiritually this course has helped me to focus. I desire to pull all the energy that goes into my emotions and spiritual life and make them one as a part of me...

I am spiritually more peaceful and I handle distress better. Energizing but relaxing and peaceful.

Spiritually I feel closer to God and nature. I have a better understanding of my physical makeup and how I'm connected to everyone. This has been joyous, enlightening, encouraging, reflection, quiet, peaceful, calming, self-evaluation, acceptance, balance, commitment, hope, prosperity, love.

Spiritually I have a greater sense of balance.

I have learned to relax and breathe. I am able to worship God through the body that he gave me.

Spiritually, I feel more whole. I never saw my body as a good thing- something to use for God, to be thankful for what he has given me. I'm thankful for (the) ability to move. I have trouble feeling comfortable in my body- but this has helped me.

I feel healthier physically, emotionally I have been able to calm myself down better, spiritually I feel more connected to God when doing Yoga.

More connected to myself and God. I've learned more about myself to make positive changes in my relationships. (this has) changed my life, connected me with mind-body-spirit, helped me get a better sense in what God wants me to do in this life.

I feel stronger and more at peace even during crazy busy weeks after taking this class

I feel more limber and I like using my meditation time with God.

I have been able to grasp the way in which to connect worship and movement.

I loved relaxation as I often found myself praying during this time. Yoga can aid in the relief of stress.

I feel I'm more at peace with myself. I like to think about God and my life while I'm meditating and I think I'm praising God for my body while I'm doing the physical exercises, too.

I feel better in my body. I have begun to experience God through exercise. My prayer life has increased and been more meaningful. I exercise when I'm stressed, use my breathing, and it helps...lose my anxieties.

Yoga has helped me keep things in better perspective...more at peace with myself. I feel calmer because I have more control over my body and feelings.

This class helped me make it through most Tuesdays and Thursdays. It has taught me a lot about how all aspects of life: spiritual, emotional and physical are all connected and can influence one another.

I eat completely different due to my understanding of mind and body and spirit. I believe this course has helped me connect to a deeper relationship with God and nature.

My body loves (yoga)! ...a new awareness about the connection between my spirit, body, and mind, and the need to be conscious of this connection in my decision making. I accept myself (my body) more where I am. I feel much more serenity from practicing yoga- more at peace with my self and my life.

It really has made me think more in depth on the whole Christianity and meditation thing.

I think I have really learned that your state of mind can affect you physically. So I'm gonna try to be aware and take care of myself emotionally and spiritually so that I will be able to carry out my physical duties in life.

It (this class) has made me realize that yoga, or anything, can be used to glorify God if used in the right way.

My body feels cleaner and more relaxed on a deeper level...opened windows into my soul.

I like the relaxation time afterwards because I can meditate on God and connect with Him spiritually.

This class has done amazing things for me! Overall (emotionally, physically, spiritually) I am a lot more healthy. A lot of people have even mentioned that to me! I can feel God's peace inside of me, too. It's a beautiful feeling.

I am more flexible, and I try to make exercise a prayer opportunity.

I also highly enjoyed the relaxation portion of the class. It helped me to become more aware of my mind, body, and soul.

Breathing helps me concentrate, especially when praying or focusing. I never realized how easy it could be just to sit and breathe, because it really makes a huge difference in someone's well-being.

It has helped me to better connect my mind, body and spirit. It gives me new avenues to the Lord and it has given me greater overall confidence. I am stronger and more quiet and gentle. It has made me an overall more peaceful person.

I have good insight toward myself. Perhaps I am now more introspective and positively self-aware.

I began to feel more connected physically, emotionally, and spiritually. My ideas on alternative forms of worship (ie. using your body and movement to worship) began to expand.

I know I am more understanding and aware of my surroundings and I think able to express my feelings better. To not worry too much about things, to be more comfortable and confident.

I feel a lot better both physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

You're not only stretching and strengthening your body but your mind as well...even your heart (spiritually speaking). I stand in awe of God! He has truly fearfully and wonderfully made each of us. This course has only enhanced that belief!

The idea of breath being inextricably linked with the spirit has intrigued me. This has made the quality of my breathing life richer and consequently my spiritual one.

I have gained flexibility and oneness with myself and God.

Yoga makes me feel connected to my hopes and to God.

APPENDIX B

YOGA/PILATES CLASS PRAYER

Dear Lord, loving God,

We thank you for our whole selves.

Be with us as we honor you with our bodies, minds, and spirits.

Help us to care for the whole selves of others

As we are representatives of your love,

Carrying on in Jesus' name.

Amen

APPENDIX C

Yoga/Pilates class questionnaire **Date:**_____ **PIN#**_____

Please respond to the following 14 statements by placing one of the following letters or pair of letters in the space at the end of each. Please include today's date where indicated, and a secret ID or PIN number that you are sure to remember 'til the end of the semester.

AGREE=**A**

DISAGREE=**D**

STRONGLY AGREE=**SA**

STRONGLY DISAGREE=**SD**

NEUTRAL=**N**

I know how to relax whenever I need to. _____

The methods I use to relax are natural and healthy. _____

My body, mind and spirit are very closely linked. _____

I often have aches and pains. _____

I feel stressed/anxious on a regular basis. _____

Christians should be very cautious about practicing yoga. _____

I am very comfortable in my body. _____

I enjoy exercising my body. _____

I use my breathing to improve the quality of my life. _____

I wish my body were different. _____

I feel depressed on a regular basis. _____

Through being in and using my body, I feel more connected to God. _____

Exercise seems to make me feel better on an emotional level. _____

I have been known to be an 'exercise evangelist'- to show other people certain exercises, or to encourage them to exercise! _____

Thanks for completing this! *Professor Jackson*

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How a program of movement, breathing and meditation served as a catalyst for healing and spiritual growth in my life

Scott Hackman

I've always been a very sensitive and spiritual person, and knew I wanted to serve God and others through the ministry. I went to a Christian college to fulfill this dream, and graduated with a youth ministry degree a year ago. Since then, I have been working full time as a youth minister at a large, non-denominational church located outside of Philadelphia, and so far it seems to be a good choice of career for me. I am 23 years old and was married 10 months ago to a wonderful young woman who has been my best friend since high school. Life is good, but I have learned that I must take care of myself so that I can stay healthy and strong. Let me tell you the story of my healing journey.

Since I was in junior high school, I can remember suffering from severe anxiety and intermittent depression. I also had a chronic stomachache that wasn't quite nausea, and wasn't quite acid reflux. Intermittent diarrhea was the norm for me. I took a lot of antacid, and came to view those little pills as my friends! An event that seemed to precipitate some of these symptoms was when my father was diagnosed with a significant, chronic illness. We had recently found a charismatic church where we worshipped and it was wonderful, but our church community did not come through for us in this time of crisis. We faced this difficult time without the clergy and community we thought we could count on. It was painful, and for a while I turned away not only from that church, but from any style of worship that resembled that church. This is significant, because in that style of worship I had found a freedom and holistic approach that had been very satisfying for me. In the charismatic approach, I had felt a connection of my body-mind and spirit and it had felt good. The letdown of losing that church along with facing the challenges my father's condition presented was a lot for me to bear at such a young age.

My anxiety and depression continued throughout college. Just when I would get the symptoms under control, I'd fall apart again. Sometimes I didn't know if I would live through it. I tried everything from medication to counseling. Spiritually I was struggling, never feeling that my theology or current modes of worship provided a context for my powerful emotional life. At a point of desperation, I enrolled in the Yoga/Pilates course taught by Professor Christina Jackson, hoping it would help me. I knew I had no control over my mind or my body, and my self-esteem was at an all time low.

The only thing I knew about yoga was some simple breathing and meditation a friend had taught me at a high school party. After a few classes I began to notice I was in my body- I felt like one unified, strong muscle. My body began to speak to me in a way that made sense. During the day, I would notice my neck becoming tense or my stomach aching at the least bit of stress. This was a profound experience for me, because I had been disconnected from my body. In my religious upbringing, knowing your body was not something that was emphasized. As I practiced yoga, I began to feel more and more like a unit instead of fragmented pieces. Metaphorically, I had always felt like I was trying to pick up the pieces of my self each day. With yoga class twice a week, this changed. The first dramatic realization was that I no longer had a stomachache. I had come to accept stomach pain as a normal thing! After a few months of class, I also noticed that my depression had lifted, and that my self-confidence was considerably stronger.

I have always been an athlete, and I have always been in touch with my emotions. Still, I had never experienced any form of exercise that didn't leave me feeling empty. I never had much of a competitive drive, and I always felt a bit weird for being such an emotionally sensitive person. In yoga, I found a form of exercise that left me feeling strong, connected through my body, mind and spirit, and peaceful. I often left class with a clear mind and a sense of euphoria.

I loved and related to the non-competitiveness of yoga. I felt connected to classmates, even if I did not know them. As the semester continued, I had more spiritual encounters both during and outside of class. For example, during the sun salutations, I began to realize that I was connected to more than my body, my body was connected to the people in the room and the spirit in the room was connected to the spirit in the world. Now I know in some Christian communities I grew up in this kind of talk could get me ostracized, but I no longer fear rejection. I have come to accept myself.

Through each class, my body was pushed to a new level of strength, and I always learned something about myself. For example, if I came to class un-detached from things happening in my life and didn't focus on staying in the present moment, I didn't get as much out of it. If I truly engaged myself in the class and used the time to release negative experiences and emotions, it was wonderful, and I left feeling good and peaceful. My own intention and discipline made a big difference.

While I don't practice yoga regularly now that the class ended, I do use aspects of it on a daily basis. For example, I use the breathing techniques regularly to stay focused and relaxed. While meeting with colleagues, parents, or youth, I will often adjust my body posture to feel more balanced and relaxed, and to project this to the person I'm talking with. I have seen this work in situations where the conversation is getting tense. To do such a simple thing as shift my position can make a big difference in the interaction.

I know that I will engage in a regular yoga practice again in the future.

I am also seeking increasingly holistic ways to worship and minister to the youth I work with. I have come to realize that this is necessary in order to honor the way we're created as well as to acknowledge the uniqueness of individuals. To deny this does not feel comfortable to me, and so I must follow God's leading and be myself. This might mean that we use more music, or add breathing and movement exercises, or bring in the emotional aspects of self to our worship experience, or that I choose to self-disclose when I feel the spirit leading me to do so. The youth program in my church has grown rapidly, and I get positive feedback from the students. I wonder how much of this growth may be because of the authenticity I strive for in my own faith journey, and how I try to use my whole self in my daily life.

When I listen to my body, mind and spirit, I stay balanced. When I don't engage my whole self and lose touch with aspects of myself, I feel bad. I will still use medication and counseling if I need them for depression, but now I recognize when I need them, and I can use the techniques I learned in yoga to help myself.

When God wants me to sing, I sing. When he wants me to breathe, I breathe. When he wants me to be silent, I meditate. If God can heal us, and I believe he can, I believe he can use anything or anyone as an instrument. I believe God used yoga to help me heal.

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