

the U.S. for practical training for democracy promotion. We should be supporting human rights NGOs and media watchdog groups to establish free and fair media in these places. Tunisia has abolished its censorship apparatus. This is an incredible opportunity—to have an Arab country with no censorship. We can help them shape their law and policies.

Much of your background is in poetry and religion. How does that background influence your views?

Poetry is really important in Middle

Eastern societies in a way that it isn't in the U.S. Most people there still express themselves in poetry. In the early days, Osama bin Laden sent messages to his followers in poetic form. In Pakistan, people write and share poetry all the time; poetry is much more democratic there than in the U.S., where it has become an elitist thing.

Just to give one example, a lot of Americans would be inclined to think of Pakistan as a fundamentalist Muslim society. Of course, there are fundamentalists in Pakistan. But the vast majority of Pakistanis adhere to Sufism, the mystical

dimension of Islam, and Pakistanis are enthralled by mystical poetry. I recently listened to some of this poetry put to music, and in the poem the mystic was saying that since God created creation, he thereby became the Creator. Having become the Creator, God can't keep that name without creation. He needs his creation. I cannot tell you how upset fundamentalists would be to hear this verse in Urdu, but it is from a very popular poet. People who don't attend to the poetic aspect of this religious culture get misled. **CC**

—Amy Frykholm

A pastor goes to yoga

My wandering mind

by *Martin B. Copenhagen*

LAST SUMMER, at the urging of a friend, I began attending yoga classes. When I said to family and friends, "I've started practicing yoga," my declaration prompted a variety of responses, mostly along the lines of disbelief or amusement. "What's so funny?" I finally asked one giggling colleague. "Well, it's

studio was during the aerobics craze in the 1980s. I loved bouncing around to funky tunes by Earth, Wind & Fire or the B-52s. The class felt like a raucous party featuring line dancing. It was nothing like what happens in a yoga studio.

Yet I tuned my heart to the slower rhythms of yoga rather quickly. All the

thoughts about worship. Being a newcomer to yoga has prompted me to reflect on what it is like to be a newcomer to one of our services. In the yoga studio there are no crosses, crucifixes or stars of David. Instead I look at a statue of the Buddha, another of a Hindu deity and some crystals. Yet none of these symbols are referenced. Why are they there? What do they mean? No one ever says.

At our church we try to make newcomers feel welcome. We greet them, invite them to coffee hour and ply them with brochures about our church. It always pains me when someone comes to worship and leaves without meeting a handful of friendly people. As a newcomer to a yoga class, however, I want to slip in and slip out unnoticed. As an off-the-charts extrovert, this has led me rather

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just a bit hard to picture," she replied. "Face it, Martin, yoga is a meditative practice, and you are one of the least meditative people I know."

It's true, in a sense. I have a hard time slowing down. I usually do my meditation amid bustle and noise. To me, the two most dreaded words in the English language are *silent retreat*. So it's not surprising that the last time I exercised in a

poses of yoga are still so new to me, and the physical demands so challenging ("You want my body to do *what*?") that the routine hardly feels like a meditation. I have begun to imagine how it could be meditative, however, which has to be some kind of progress.

Among the thoughts that course through my brain when I'm supposed to be focusing on my breathing are

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belatedly to a basic truth: sometimes the friendliest thing one can do is to leave a person alone.

At the beginning of one yoga class, the teacher led everyone in a chant in Sanskrit. Everyone except me seemed to know it, perhaps not unlike when a visitor new to the faith hears the Lord's Prayer recited in our worship. I wondered what the yoga teacher was saying and whether, once I understood it, I would feel able to join in. Perhaps I would have to hold back because I couldn't affirm whatever she was chanting. For now, all I do is listen.

All the yoga poses have Sanskrit names, and other Sanskrit phrases are used in reference to I-don't-know-what. Sometimes the teacher translates the words into English. When she doesn't, I feel as if I've wandered into a Latin mass and hope that I can figure out when I'm supposed to kneel by watching everyone else.

The music played in yoga class is different from what I would listen to at home. There seems to be a lot of Enya, an Irish singer with an ethereal voice that I've always disliked. I know that the music is supposed to relax us, but I find myself distracted as I imagine listening to different music. I guess it'd be too much to ask the teacher to play some Marvin Gaye or Dizzy Gillespie. But surely a Chopin nocturne or a Bill Evans riff would be mellow enough. In one class the teacher mixed in music of pop singers Jackson Browne and James Taylor. I wondered if that change stirred controversy among the yoga students in the way that changes in music get people riled up in churches.


At the end of class everyone is instructed to lie still while the teacher offers what might be called a meditation (I'm sure there is a Sanskrit name for it). We are encouraged to focus on our breathing, or to inhabit our bodies differently, or to become in tune with our spir-

its. At these times, it's a disadvantage to have a theological education because I find my mind wandering: "This sounds like Gnosticism. Or Neoplatonism, at least." Then I ponder how these affirmations fit or don't fit into my theology. Then I wonder if newcomers to our church ask similarly skeptical questions when they hear me preach. Eventually I quiet my mind and just let the words wash over me.

Yoga has also prompted me to consider some of the limitations of worship in our church. In our worship we declare the mystery of the incarnation. We also affirm the psychosomatic unity of all people—that is, that our bodies and spirits are not two separate realities but inseparably one. You would never know that from our worship, however, which tends to be from the neck up. For the most part, the only time worshipers move is when we stand up for the hymns.

We once had musicians from Nicaragua help lead our worship, and during one song they invited us to turn around in a circle. But there was not enough room in our pews to turn around without great difficulty, and most of us were in a quandary, feeling awkward and tense. How can we be incarnational in our worship when we cannot even turn around? In some ways yoga helps its practitioners experience the unity of body and spirit more fully than our current modes of worship do.

When I told someone that I had taken up yoga, she asked, "Oh really? What kind?" I replied with a self-conscious laugh, "There are *kinds*? I had no idea." I realize that my response exposed me as a rank beginner, one not able to make such distinctions. Sometimes I am on the other end of similar conversations. "So you're a Congregational minister, right? Is that really any different from Methodist or Presbyterian?" My usual response is something like, "Well, there are important differences—but none that you have to worry about."

So I guess I'm learning to meditate after all, even as I'm arranging my body into all kinds of new poses. Meditating about the church and our worship is a good thing. Besides, it helps distract me from my sore muscles. 

Im Friedhof

Dietlikon, Switzerland

In your black coat I walk into June heat.
You take a dark bird's shape and fly away.
I see your ghost, but it does not see me.

The recently bereaved are hard to please.
I didn't make your bed or your mistakes.
In your black coat I walk into June heat.

A phantom bone that haunts its amputee,
of all my specters, you are most awake.
I see your ghost, but it does not see me.

I pilfer through these memories like a thief.
But maybe all's not lost. Some's just misplaced.
In your black coat I walk into June heat

And I keen once more for your mortal hands beneath
What gravid fabrics other fingers braid.
I see your ghost, but it does not see me.

So I sail, half-masted, through the ghastly sea
Of these wasted, assailing lovers, loss and fate.
In your black coat I walked into June heat.
I did not leave your ghost. But it left me.

Jill Alexander Essbaum

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