

Later in life, yoga suddenly became my thing

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ILLUSTRATION BY CHELSEA O'BYRNE

There were several occasions in the last three decades when I took a yoga class, four by my latest count. Nothing stuck for more than 60 minutes. Now I'm on the mat (as we, ahem, like to say) four or five times a week.

Not sure what happened between decades three and four, but here I am today in my 60s actively seeking out a yoga flow class, searching YouTube for restorative practice and talking retreats with new-found friends. I have blocks, straps, pillows, bolsters, blankets and mats in many colours, designs and grips. I even have a plastic frog in full lotus. Truth is, I have a yoga room.

I'm not an exercise person. I have never had the desire to scale mountains, ski down or hike mountainous terrain. I'm equally averse to water aerobics: surfing, paddling, polo. Give it all the cool names you want – finswimming, aquajogging, wakeskating – and I'm staying on terra firma.

Fact is, I'd rather have an enema than exercise.

Actually, that was the old me. The new me would rather do a downward dog.

I'm not sure which came first – not being good at sports or not being interested in sports. They are indelibly intertwined, like chicken and egg or the yoga pose eagle arms and legs (which I can do).

Regardless, here I am, sports unenthusiast. I want to be healthy. What I've never wanted is to work at being healthy because it's boring and hard (so I had come to believe). Yet, periodically I would propel myself to some gym, some piece of equipment, or even some yoga mat to get my body in shape.

In the case of yoga, that lasted for a full 240 minutes over 30 years. (In the case of lifting weights, running on the treadmill, aquacise, the number is much, much lower.)

The turning point in my yoga journey, it turned out, was around the corner from where I live. An instructor started renting studio space in a new building, and my aunt and I decided to give it a try. We liked it. We really liked it.

I'm not sure why. It may be the variety of poses we learned, that each class was new and different, that we got to know participants. But I had all that before. The reason, I discovered, is not important. The reality is.

At some point, actually several points, my body responded in ways it never had before. My feet touched the mat, both of them, when I did a downward dog; my hands (both of them) held each other doing a bound side angle.

I also noticed a marked improvement in my knee. My doctor had diagnosed a tear in my meniscus and wished me well. When I couldn't complete a yoga pose because of it, an instructor recommended putting something like a sock between my knee and my bent

leg. It worked. As I spent more time on the mat, I used the sock less and less. Today, I get no complaints from my knee, and use socks only to cover my feet.

It wasn't only my knee that got better. My strength, my balance and my flexibility improved.

Perspective changes on the mat. There is a common yoga pose called child's pose. You put thighs on calves, buttocks on heels, and fold yourself into a ball. It's supposed to be a resting position, one you come to after other poses have offended your body in ways you didn't know existed. For most of us, child's pose is, at first, the farthest thing from a rest primarily because there is a wide gap between our bottom and our heels. Most of us accommodate, as yoga teaches us. We shove bolsters, blankets and blocks under our rear to close the gap. Still a faint wisp of failure lingers.

I'm in an extended child's pose during one class and realize I'm enjoying this fetal shape. I am relaxed, breathing deeply, and feeling something new: contentment. I tried to figure out what had shifted and realized, in part, the answer was physical. My rear end was not pointed heavenward; it was nestled on my feet. I was a ball without the need of a bolster.

There are those poses that continue to confound. My legs refuse to rearrange themselves into a lotus, although they are inching closer. Crow pose eludes me. Both feet refuse to come off the floor, but one will, so I'm making progress. And there are those poses I have yet to attempt. Their names will tell you why: formidable face pose, handstand scorpion, destroyer of the universe.

Overall, however, I find a sense of peace and contentment in many poses and in my practice. Indeed, I find more than this. Yoga has taught me that practice is about more than positioning the body. It is about body, mind and spirit. It is about connecting with yourself. It is about finding balance. It is about going to the edge, but not over the cliff. It is about acknowledging growth and recognizing limitations. It is about joy. The joy that comes from sitting on a mat with your heels stuffed into your bottom and your heart soaring.

Ultimately yoga has taught me patience and acceptance. The fundamental reality of any practice is this: yoga teachers cannot count. They put you in a pose, say warrior II, then they suggest you place your right shoulder against your inner thigh while extending your left arm toward the ceiling, bending your elbow, bringing your left arm behind you, and clasping your right hand. It's like scrubbing the floor while looking at mould on the ceiling.

I can actually do this. And I can hear my yoga instructor saying, "Hold for three breaths," just before launching into a tale about their morning drive to work. Three minutes later – not three breaths – we unbind and unbend. All yoga teachers are trained to do this.

When instructors tell you to hold for five breaths – a lifetime when your hips are squared, your shoulders flexed, and your legs interwoven – they are lying. Admittedly, they are well intended. Some even come with timers, beacons of false hope.

In the end, it doesn't matter. I am on the mat, moving in sync with my breath, finding my body moving with me (or against me) and I'm okay with that. I have learned the challenging poses – lizard, dolphin, fish – are friends. We meet here on this rectangular piece of vinyl, and I take pieces of them with me when I roll up my mat, put away my straps and head out the door.

The joy of having been for a time an aquatic animal infuses and informs. It is so much more than legs splayed, ankles nestled, arms extended. And holding for five delicious breaths.

Ish.

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