

Stealing Back the Lost Years

On mornings like this one, when it takes about half an hour after getting out of bed to stand up straight (Homo Semi-Erectus), I lament that getting older really bites. Despite the fact that entire industries have sprung up in recent years celebrating (and profiting from) our aging population, I can find few reasons to cheer. On this morning, the evidence of my flight from youth is startlingly apparent: my bathroom mirror is disillusioned with what it sees – gravity is insidiously compressing and re-shaping me in unflattering ways. The spring in my step has gradually given way to the fall in my arches. Can the winter of my discontent be far behind? (I won't even *begin* to talk about my behind).

Chronic injuries have only hastened the slide into my middle age malaise. A couple of years ago, neck problems forced me to walk away from tennis, my first love. I have remained in a state of creaky despair ever since, mourning the loss of one of the last tangible connections to my youth.

Fortunately, my dysfunctional mornings are beginning to lessen in their frequency and severity. I credit this recent improvement in my physical condition to a return to yoga. I had dabbled in yoga intermittently in the past, but I always felt like an observer rather than a participant in the classes I attended. It was as if I wore a “just visiting” sign around my neck, lest anyone assume that I was about to take all of this seriously. Yoga just felt too “out there” to me; I was used to more grounded activities like tennis (and before that, baseball). Yoga seemed to float just beyond my reach, lacking the substance I was seeking. Although my back pain gradually lessened and I felt both mentally and physically refreshed after each class, I still wouldn't give myself to the discipline, and before long my twice weekly sessions had shrunk to one and then to none at all.

Around late August, about two years since I last unrolled a yoga mat, I received a flyer from the yoga instructor, reminding current and lapsed participants that the fall session was to begin after Labour Day. These flyers arrived quarterly, announcing the start of a new season of classes. In the past, I had barely glanced at them, tossing them into the recycling bin along with the ads for age-defying revitalising cream and subscriptions to Boomer magazine. This time, however, I placed it on the fridge (where all truly valuable pieces of information go) and stared at it every so often, perhaps allowing the message “You need this! Sign up now!” to slowly sink in.

About two weeks later, I pulled into the parking lot of the church where the classes were held. Walking into the hall that was already littered with mats and water bottles and with people (mostly women) chatting, stretching and meditating, I still wasn't quite sure why I was there. Was I looking to become more flexible? More fit? More relaxed and at peace? The answer, I knew deep down, was all of the above. In addition to my physical woes, the stress of a

marriage breakdown had stolen years from my life, and I wanted to find a way to get them back. Besides, as a single parent, I found that I was spending far too much time at home and needed some structured “me” time, away from the responsibilities of fatherhood.

Perhaps it was this realization that allowed me to accept what yoga had tried to offer me in the past: the chance to leave my messy, cluttered world for an hour or so and to relax, to refresh and to heal. Although I took great pains to hide it, the emotional fractures of my recent separation weren't healing well; I needed to devote more time to my needs, and this was the refuge to allow me to do that.

So, through the breathing, stretching, strengthening and relaxing, I have begun to feel better, little by little, inside and out. As an added bonus, even my golf game has begun to improve (I recently learned that many classes in the U.S. promote yoga for golfers. Who knew?). I'm still nowhere near the level of fitness that will please my bathroom mirror, but I *am* stealing back what I've lost, a day at a time.

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