

YOGA FOR THE RETIRED SOUL

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“Ohm,” I chanted along with 20 or so others as we readied our minds and spirits at Friday’s yoga class. The others sat cross legged, while I crouched on a block to lift my sore 65 year old hips off the floor. Arthritis wasn’t something I ever planned on getting, but it snuck up on me when I wasn’t looking.

“Just do what you can,” the teacher had said earlier. As a previous dancer, long sense retired, I wanted to do more than I could, but hearing her gentle words helped me to be easier on myself.

“Ohm ... ohm.” Beautiful tones swept across the beige wooden floors, and bounced up against the high ceilings and white stucco walls. My body vibrated with the lovely music our voices created. The black velvet band I wore to keep my shoulder length blonde / gray hair out of my eyes pressed hard against my forehead.

After the “ohm’s,” the strong, lyrical voice of our teacher led us through a song of self acceptance, love, divinity within, and appreciation for life. The words were Sanskrit. My high school Latin (even if I could remember it) was useless. A pang of feeling stupid zipped through my chest. “Will I ever get this right?”

As I struggled to follow her lead, the memory of a little girl, my daughter, aged 10, dressed in a pink gingham skirt and white blouse, flashed through my head. “I can’t sing in front of all these people. It’s too scary,” she said. Her little chin trembled as we stood in the wings waiting for her turn to perform at Wonderland Grade School. “Just try,” I replied. “Do what you can.”

When we were deep into the hour the teacher said we were warmed up enough to do handstands. Handstands! Ye, gads. I hadn’t done handstands since I was eighteen and a paid dancer at Ben Maksik’s Country Club in Long Island. That’s 3,000 miles from Los Angeles and 47 years into my past. I tugged nervously on my long purple t-shirt and twisted my fingers around the loose bottom.

Our teacher demonstrated how to get into position. “Put your hands on the floor, fingers facing forward. Raise your hips as high as you can. Walk forward until your knees rest on your elbows. Plug your shoulders firmly together. Then, lift one leg at a time off the floor. When you’re ready lean forward and balance both feet above the ground.” I watched in envy as she gracefully lifted herself up, while a lithe young woman, dressed in blue stretch pants and a t-shirt that read “Buddha”, held her arm out to help balance our teacher in the air.

I tried to re-jog my memory. Wasn’t this listed as a “basics” class, one suitable for beginners? It didn’t say anything about group preparation for the Cirque de Soleil. My stomach tightened. That thing called Karma was coming back to haunt me. How many times had I told my little girl that she “could” do a *walkover* if she just kept trying. A walkover is a combination of standing on your hands, going into a backbend, and then standing up. That’s three moves, not just one. I didn’t pay attention to the look of fear that flooded her face. “You can do it. I know you can. Just try,” I said over and over.

When I was a young, physically fit woman it didn’t seem that difficult. I mean, she was little, close to the ground, how hard could it be? Guilt pangs shot through my chest. “Sorry,” I muttered to her memory.

We were encouraged to find a partner to help us get the “feel” of lifting off the ground. I watched as the others paired up. Excuses raced through my head. Should I go to the bathroom, wash my hands, go downstairs and get a drink of water?

As I was trying to figure out my next move the teacher walked back to where I’d set up my mat. In the back of the room, of course. “You can do it Mom, I know you can.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

You have to be careful what you tell your children, the words come back to haunt you.

“Just try. I’ll help you. I think you can do it.”

I shook my head, bent down, walked my feet forward, strengthened my shoulders and with everything inside of me screaming “I can’t do this,” I kicked as high as I could. And, my daughter, the teacher, was right. I could do it. It felt exhilarating. My heart beat wildly at knowing that I could still do something as physically challenging as a handstand.

I didn’t stay up for very long that first time, but now, after a year, the screams are fainter and the knots in my stomach have lessened. I know that when I think I can’t do something, if I try, I often succeed.

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