

Reflection

By Steve Conroy

Since going through the Men's Rites of Passage I have been noticing more and more the great patterns that we all participate in. One of the biggest that I have been noticing is Death and Resurrection. At the MROP my eyes were opened to it in a dramatic way when I was out in nature, but lately I have been seeing it in random places on a regular basis. Even in my own body and my own perceptions, I am being reminded of this constantly.

With time passing, and as I age, I show more signs and feel more symptoms that let me know death is coming. While I feel and see this happening to me, it seems slow and not very dramatic, but when I see it happening to other people it can be quite shocking at times. For example, when I suddenly run into people my age whom I have not seen for a while, the changes they have undergone and the wearing down of their physical bodies can be alarming. At the same time, younger people are looking younger and fresher than I can ever remember us older folks being. Young people, who don't look old enough, are also having children. Thankfully my perception of children remains unchanged. They seem the same to me, which is comforting.

Another part of this aging process is the aches and pains that are almost always there now. Years of abuse and injuries have left me with a level of pain that I have more and more trouble dealing with. In my younger days I would press and work my way through many of these annoyances but, as I age, my capacity to do so is diminishing. I have these "standard," always-present pains that can diminish when I get in motion and move around, but if I move too much I end up in worse pain. This has become more and more of a balancing act as time passes.

One activity I have found that allows the movement and challenges me physically, yet is kind to my body, is yoga. I have been doing it fairly consistently for about six years now. I like how it energizes me and stretches those areas that get stiff and sore, providing some relief. I also very much appreciate the mindfulness aspect, the meditative approach that it takes to practice yoga. I find the words coming from the instructors helpful, not only for the time we are working through the poses, but also as mantras for living: "There is no perfect pose." "We all have different bodies and different life experiences; not everyone does each pose the same way." "Let go of your crazy day." "Some poses are uncomfortable. Life can be

uncomfortable. Relax, breathe into the pain, and let it pass.” “Concentrate on your breath and let that calm your mind.”

Lately I started doing Bikram, or hot, yoga. This type of yoga is very challenging. Many of the poses are very difficult and they are all done in a heated room. The first few sessions were extremely demanding but, after that, it felt as if my body was craving more. It is supposed to stimulate your glands and organs which, in turn, gives you more energy and stimulates healing processes. I have not been doing it long enough to offer any testimonials concerning those claims, except sometimes I feel more energetic after the practice.

During those first few weeks, when it was really tough getting through the 90 minutes, again this pattern of Death and Resurrection jumped out at me. The pose that is done the most during that 90 minutes is called Savasana, or Dead Body Pose or Corpse Pose. This is a resting pose, which to me is sort of curious—that there would need to be an official pose for resting. To intentionally have people stop and do nothing, especially during a time dedicated to exercising? I was told that it's a very powerful way to breathe life back into the body, and that each Savasana helps us restore our circulation and our breath so that we can regain energy for the next posture. I am glad we return to this pose as often as we do during the practice, for two reasons: one, I need those rest periods just to get through the practice; and two, as a reminder for the rest of my life, where it seems I spend so much time on this non-stop treadmill of going places and doing things. I can choose to always be busy, busy, busy, or I can choose otherwise. So, I really appreciate these periodic admonitions to just *stop*, and to *rest*, because I don't do that enough.

So there are these specified periods of Savasana, some that have us lying prone on our stomachs, and others lying on our backs. After each back-lying Savasana there is an Energetic Sit Up. In one swift motion we are instructed to bolt up and reach for our toes and stretch forward. It is such a contrast to just lying there as if we are dead, to move quickly and reach out for our feet. I wondered if Lazarus, when called forth from the grave, bolted up. What about me? If I were really dead, and I was called to get up, would I energetically sit up? Do I have a passion or a purpose in my life that would drive me to jump right back in, to spring right back to it? Or does it take something more?

Maybe another analogy would be, if I get knocked down, do I get right back up again? When life takes a turn for the worse and I lose a job, lose a relationship, or lose a loved one to death, am I able to come back from that? In the book *Falling Upward*, author Richard Rohr says that we all must go

through some type of necessary suffering. Success has very little to teach us in the second half of life. God uses suffering to get through to us. But Western society has taught us very little about navigating the dark places where this suffering takes us. We don't do well with the things that make us feel like we have died. We have no way of resurrecting ourselves from those experiences, hence we see so many depressed, demoralized, and angry people in our society.

I wonder about the people practicing this Bikram type of yoga. Is this one way of training ourselves to expect death and resurrection? Are they, with or without knowing it, training themselves to "bolt up" after being down? From my experience of doing the practice, it sure feels like suffering...and I have always survived—maybe even thrived—because of it. I have read some of the testimonies on the local studio website about some incredible tales of being in car accidents, having severe health and emotional issues, and all of these people said the yoga helped them through it. Not only did it help them through it, but these people seem to have a lot of joy and happiness after having come out the other side of these troubles. I also noticed that, especially with the teachers, there is a high level of kindness and appreciation for others. I don't get the impression these people are depressed, demoralized, or angry.

So I wanted to ask some of the teachers about the practice and if there was some intentionality to what they are doing. Is part of the lesson in yoga that you "suffer to get well" or teaching people that by laying down your life, to die to yourself or to things, you can be resurrected? I asked one of the teachers about my recognition of the death and resurrection pattern in the practice and could she relate to that? What followed was an amazing story of how she moved through a very tough grieving process, and felt safe to do so, while practicing and teaching yoga. She had suffered a significant loss. Sometimes she would come to yoga and just cry, which was all she could do at first. Savasana was the only pose she wanted to do on those days. Later as other emotions came up, being there in the yoga room helped her deal with those. For example, when she was angry she had to look at herself in the mirror. (All the yoga instructors constantly remind us to look at ourself during all poses) By looking she was forced to see her anger and to face herself and what she was doing. She described it was as if she was being called out on her behavior by herself but not in a condemning way rather in a simple, "do you see what you are doing" way. After a long time things got better for her. She now says she does not feel trapped anymore and there is freedom. She believes she is stronger now than she has ever been before.

One of the other instructors, when asked if she could relate to both the "Suffer to get well" and Death and Resurrection themes, responded with

"They do not advocate a 'No Pain – No Gain' approach, but there is some truth in 'suffering to get well' in yoga because the practice is very challenging and at times we are suffering through it." She also said there is no direct teaching of Death and Resurrection as religion teaches it, but they do very much advocate letting go of ego, of letting the ego die, of letting go of the old self so the true self can emerge, which fits perfectly with my regular meditation/centering prayer life. But I also like that it is different...more like a moving or walking meditation. I am still too much of a novice to understand everything about it, but what I have seen, from the people that teach yoga and the people that practice it, is that it appears to foster and encourage a caring, peaceful and kind attitude.

It reminds me of this poem:

Kindness

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.
Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes

and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

By Naomi Shihab Nye
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