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The Practice of Yoga and *Cura Personalis*

By Rachel Wifall

Scientific studies have determined that we can enhance both our physical and mental well-being through the practice of yoga. People tend to associate yoga with “stretching,” which is helpful for releasing stress and avoiding injury; however, it is much more. Practicing yoga both lengthens and strengthens muscles and creates space and flexibility in the spine. It can also lower stress hormone levels and stimulate the lymphatic system, minimizing inflammation and removing toxins from the body. As a professor of English literature at Saint Peter’s University and a yoga instructor at the campus recreational center, I feel privileged to be able to provide forms of *cura personalis*, or care for the whole person, to my students, colleagues, and neighbors – from the classroom to the boardroom to the mat. My yoga classes have become



The Saint Peter's University Men's Baseball Team performing Virabhadrasana 2 (Warrior 2)

increasingly popular over the past few years, and this interest would seem to speak to a growing national need for holistic care of the self.

The Sanskrit word “yoga” means “union” or “connection,” and the practice of yoga connects the body and mind. It does not only incorporate physical *asanas* (poses), but it also includes mindfulness and meditation: a focus on deep breathing (*pranayama*) and looking inward, thereby calming the nervous system and aiding with focus and introspection. *Yama*, one of the “eight limbs” of yogic philosophy, is a set of ethical standards which includes *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *satya* (truthfulness).

This issue of *Conversations* magazine was inspired by the fact that university students are increasingly seeking help for anxiety and depression, and many campus counseling centers are finding

themselves overextended and overwhelmed. I myself have been approached by students struggling with stress and lack of motivation; while I refer them to the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services, I am not hesitant to let them know that I too have suffered with anxiety and depression, and I also suggest that they come to my yoga class. If they take my advice, the results are always good. Student Elizabeth Demers ('20) gave yoga a try and now claims, “Yoga helps me quiet my mind and challenge my body. Although it’s a lot of stretching and physical effort, the end feels like a full body massage, mental peace, and an affirmation of my capabilities.”

Word has gotten around campus, and every week I see a growing number of both regulars and newcomers in class. I’m glad to see an equal interest from males and females, athletes and non-athletes, and people from a wide range of

ethnic backgrounds. Some colleagues and students have asked for the university to offer more yoga classes and have even come to classes which I teach off campus. Athletic coaches have been encouraging their team members to come to yoga class. Swim team member Daniel Betts ('19) claims, “Yoga increases flexibility in my shoulders and hips, which are crucial components to fast swimming. Also, breath control is a huge asset I take away from yoga, considering swimming is a sport where much of the time spent is holding one’s breath.” The men’s baseball coach has asked me to give his team private lessons, and the players have been surprised by the efficacy of yoga. Baseball player Nicholas Ciocco ('18) admits, “Taking yoga has been a much more meaningful experience than I anticipated. As a person who is not flexible in the slightest, I have realized

Service Dog Program

Author Rachel Wifall speaks with great affection of the service dogs she has come to know, another factor in wellness. Dr. Wifall's colleague and friend at Saint Peter's University, chemistry professor Pat Redden, trains service dogs to help individuals with special needs. Her first trainee, Ella, did not finish the program but instead became Dr. Redden's pet. Ella (photo below) is a registered therapy dog who comforts students at the library during final exams. Dr. Redden is now leading Vincent (pictured here) through the 16- to 18- month course to become a service dog. Students and staff have begun raising aspiring service dogs through her agency.



Saint Peter's University community members in Balasana (Child's Pose)

that yoga is much more than just stretching and working your core. It has given me the opportunity to reflect upon myself and get relaxation which I never thought I needed."

Besides offering yoga classes as part of their recreational offerings, Jesuit universities might consider hosting the workshop or retreat with Ignatian Yoga, founded by Bobby Karle, S.J., and Alan Haras. Their mission statement reads: "Ignatian Yoga is a collaborative ministry of Jesuits and lay people that integrates the spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola and the practices of yoga and meditation. Ignatian Yoga invites participants to reflect on God's presence in their life experiences, connecting mind, body and spirit with a diverse array of old and new practices." Ignatian Yoga combines the traditions of Ignatian spirituality (the examen, Ignatian discernment, Ignatian contemplation, communal prayer, and group sharing) with the practice of yoga *asanas*, breathing, and meditation. According to

Karle, it is becoming quite popular. In response, he would like to expand the practice and bring other instructors into the movement.

On YouTube, James Martin, S.J., notes that there has been some pushback from those who do not approve of linking yogic traditions with Christianity; however, he encourages everyone to try Ignatian Yoga, remembering that "we are embodied creatures" and that, as Thomas Merton would assert, we can learn from other spiritual traditions. Jesuit priest and Hindu scholar Francis X. Clooney finds commonality between Jesuit spiritual exercises and yogic traditions and claims that these practices can be "friendly partners." This has certainly been my experience.

Rachel Wifall is an associate professor of English literature at Saint Peter's University, specializing in Shakespearean drama. A registered yoga teacher, she has been practicing yoga since 1999 and is also a member of the Conversations seminar.