

Church community embraces yoga

Language of yoga consistent with what is heard during a service

Mario Toneguzzi

Calgary Herald

Saturday, October 01, 2011

A Calgary Christian church and community is embracing the tradition and practice of yoga.

"I went to yoga and I thought I was going for a workout but what I realized, it was a workout for your body, yes, your mind and your spirit for sure," says Rev. John Pentland of Hillhurst United Church.

"And as I listened to the conversation of the instructor, I was really struck with the similarity in language between the language we might use on Sunday and language she uses in a practice.



CREDIT: Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald
Rev. John Pentland, minister of the Hillhurst United Church in Calgary, and yoga instructor Beth Workman.

"And even the word practice. I love the word practice. I often will say on Sunday morning, 'We come to our practice,' as a way of thinking that worship is a practice. It's something we're learning all the time."

While in the yoga class, Pentland listened intently to the speaker use language the Christian language is familiar with.

Awakened.

Opening your heart. Practice.

Breath.

"Those are all words we would use in a Christian worship service," says Pentland. "I was intrigued with that."

Pentland, along with congregation member Hillary Higgins, delivered a sermon during the summer on yoga.

Starting this morning, Kriyayoga Meditation Calgary is renting out space at the church for its regular practice group meeting on Saturday mornings. And many members of the Hillhurst congregation have taken up yoga practice, as well.

"The world has become smaller. We are starting to see the connections in all the world religions and even in the practices," says Pentland. "I don't think (yoga) is antithetical. I think it actually complements Christianity.

"And one of the key aspects I hear in yoga which I think is true in Christianity is the phrase 'opening your heart.' When I heard that phrase, I started to figure out what it means theologically. I called a Jewish rabbi and asked him about it. He said the heart was central in Jewish tradition. It wasn't just a place of emotion, it was a place that contained the intellect, the psyche, the whole understanding of who you are. Knowledge. So the opening of our heart to me is what any good religion does.

"The Scriptures will talk about a closed heart. Fat heart. Hard heart. I think spirituality is about cracking the heart or hatching the heart is a better word. So the way I like to think of it is there's stuff around our heart and the spirit is trying to hatch it open and that's what I think is a common denominator with the Jewish faith, the Christian faith, the yoga tradition and practice."

Beth Workman, a member of the Hillhurst congregation, is a yoga teacher and is studying yoga therapy at Mount Royal University. She teaches yoga out of her home, attended by many members of the congregation.

"Most people are coming for stress reduction. They're looking for ways of getting some ease from the stress in their life and some practices around that," says Workman, "but they're finding a lot more. They're entering with the bodywork, then getting experiences with the breath work, and then they're finding some peace and some relief from the noise in their heads, which is opening a space for other to come in."

Higgins says yoga unites our full spirit, mind and body which allows us to come into the full potential of ourselves.

"Yoga has given me a space to identify the many masks I wear throughout the day," she says. "Although these masks or personas can serve us well, sometimes they can disguise our authentic self.

Yoga gives me a tool box to shine who I am forward in this world.

Yoga gives pause to the world around us, and just for a moment allows us to connect with that which was, that which is and that which will come."

She says that when we have an experience in our life, we sometimes store that energy in our body which manifests in muscle tightness, stress or pain. And stressful encounters will be held in the heart. Yoga gives people a space and physical practice to open the heart.

"We find space and openness by not only relaxing the body but allowing the mind to release the past," explains Higgins. "Through pranayama (breathing exercise) and flow of prana (energy), we can find letting go of the past opens us to the present."

Pentland says he has no concerns about incorporating yoga within the Christian tradition. Jesus Christ talked about the body, mind and spirit. He spoke of the body as the container of a person's spirit.

"So I think practices like meditation, which is part of what yoga is, the physical exercise and the thinking of opening your heart is profoundly spiritual," he says. "I would say that we're going to find that connection more often than we think. The way I define spirituality is seeing the sacred connections in all of life. Whether you're Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, a yoga practitioner, it's about seeing the connections, and yoga helps you do that."

When Pentland looked up the meaning of the word yoga, he found a definition regarding union. Another one was yoke. He thought of Jesus' phrase in the Bible of asking people to come to Him - all those who are weary. His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

"I thought about it in the sense that often we create religion that is burdensome or heavy-laden. Bondage. Jesus using the word yoke was actually not to be about a burden, but to be about a freedom, a lightness. I really like that when I think about yoga."

Another important connection between yoga and Christianity is the aspect of letting go.

"The church has always been about it, but the church has been perceived about achieving something. Yoga is about letting go and that letting go is embodied in Jesus. Jesus let go all the time."

mtoneguzzi@calgaryherald.com

© Calgary Herald 2011

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2012 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.