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Valerie Elverton Dixon

Theological Opportunities Program

April 17, 2008

Myself:

Strengthening the Spiritual Core

Pilates is all the rage these days. It is an exercise system founded by Joseph H. Pilates (1880-1907) who brought his system to the United States in 1926. Initially embraced by New York City dancers, the system was first known as Contology. The idea is to strengthen the core muscles of the body – abdominals, gluteals, and the lower back – to make a powerful center. The strength and flexibility of the limbs begin with the strength of the core.

Pilates is a mind body technique. It relies upon intention and attention. Thinking about the muscles and the movement, focusing attention on the placement of the body, conducting a mental inventory of how the body is positioned, of how it looks in the mind's eye, intensifies the effectiveness of the exercise. Control of the body depends upon control of the mind to focus on the body. Also, the breath is important to this technique. While tightening the abdominals and/or the gluteals, one breathes through lateral breathing that causes the lungs to expand out from the sides. This is different from the in and out breathing from the diaphragm or the down and up breathing of some yoga techniques. So one must think/inhale; think/move; think/exhale.

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Pilates calls on the practitioner to be as precise in the movement as possible, and one movement ought to flow into the next. Thus, breath, concentration, control, centering, precision and flow are all important elements of Pilates. All these elements create a system that brings together eastern and western physical cultures – yoga from the east and gymnastics from the west. These elements create a system of physical culture that is holistic in that it recognizes that practitioners of the technique cannot accomplish much of great value if the mind and the body and the breath are not working in concert. Bringing these elements together is an act of will. It becomes a discipline that is incorporated into every day; it becomes a way of life.

Yoga philosophy also teaches the importance of intention and attention in developing our spiritual selves. The strengthening of the spiritual core also brings together various elements of mind, body, and breath through an act of will. Strengthening the spiritual core is a moral exercise. It requires a purposeful attention to what we do. The goal is spiritual progression. There are eight steps of spiritual progression according to Leonard Perlmutter and Jenness Cortez Perlmutter writing in the book The Heart and Science of Yoga: a Blueprint for Peace, Happiness and Freedom from Fear.

Yamas disciplines external relationships with other people and “one’s own body, energy and senses.”

ahimsa (non-harming)

satya (truthfulness)

asteya (non-stealing)

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bramacharya (conservation and moderation of energy)

aparigraha (non-possessiveness)

Niyamas organization of our daily personal lives

saucha (purity)

santosha (contentment)

tapas (self-discipline)

svadhyaya (self-study)

Ishvara pranidhana (self-surrender)

Asana physical postures

Pranayama control of breath and *prana* (vital energy)

Pratyahara control of the senses

Dharana concentration (one-pointed attention)

Dhyana meditation

Samadhi absorption into the superconscious state or Godhead; also known as self-realization (10)

Today, let us consider the first rung of this ladder of spiritual progression. Some of these concepts are ideas with which some westerners are familiar because of the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi. No harm. The concept of *ahimsa* is a concept of nonviolence; in Christianity we would understand it as the virtue of gentleness. It is the discipline to be nonviolent in our thoughts, words and deeds. We seek to do no harm to either ourselves or to others. In my opinion, this includes retaliation for harm we think others have done to us.

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Satya, truthfulness is also a concept with which we are familiar from the work of Gandhi. His method of nonviolent passive resistance is known as *satyagraha* – truth persistence, or truth force. The intention of this method of social and political reform is to reveal the truth.

Violence and confusion are the result of deception, both in the personal and in the political realm.

Thus, to strengthened the spiritual core, it is important that we are intentional about truth telling. The virtue and value of *satya* or truthfulness, is that it is the first step to clarity and the serenity that comes through clarity. Truthfulness helps us to get to our own personal peace.

Asteya, non-stealing is the discipline of right acquisition. It is both legally and morally wrong to take what does not belong to us. It is basic injustice. At the same time, according to this system of thought, it is spiritually harmful. However, taking material things is not the only kind of theft. We steal each other's good name and reputations when we gossip and lie and distort the meaning and message of what people have to say for some personal or political advantage. When we listen to such deceptions and accept them and repeat them, we are participating in the theft. We weaken our spiritual core. Very often it takes more effort to acquire what is our just due, but just as in Pilates, strength is the reward of effort.

Bramacharya, conservation and moderation of energy is a discipline that not only has personal import, but is also important for us to consider regarding the conservation of the earth's energy. In Pilates, when the movement is done with focus of mind, with intention and with attention, the benefits of the movement come from a more efficient use of energy. Similarly, when we are intentional about our spiritual strength, we pay attention to the conservation of our personal power and of the earth power that fuels our lives. We ought not waste energy on

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nonsense. We ought not keep lights burning and the television on and the radio on and the computers on when we could be sleeping or meditating or watching the sunset or the moonrise, or listening to the music of birdsong and cricket chirps or to a symphony of silence. We could strengthen our bodies and calm our minds with a walk to the store to buy only what we can carry.

This leads us to *aparigraha*, non possessiveness. The stuff we own, owns us. We have to house it, secure it and dust it. All too often in our society we measure our worth or the success of our lives according to how much stuff we possess. This is the wrong measure. It is a measure of our ability to take from the world, not our ability to give. It is measure of our relationship with dead objects that cannot remember us or love us or shed a tear when we are gone. And when we breathe our last breath, who will care about the stuff we own? What will be significant to the world is whose life we touched and whether that touch was a gentle touch of love and acceptance or a hard touch of fear, or judgment, or of condemnation. When we breathe our last, the question for us and for those we leave behind is: how did we use our breath, what did we inhale from and exhale back into the air around us?

The breath is the animating element of life. The English word for spirit derives from the Latin *spiritus* which means breath. The word spirit has acquired multiple meanings over time, including incorporeal consciousness, angels, demons, mind, will, desire, the essential character of this or that. However, spirit remains part of the mystery of life. The unborn child, though alive and moving, is breathing the breath of the mother. S/he breaths on h/er own at birth. S/he is h/er own discrete individual that now participates in the inhalations and exhalations of life at birth. S/he becomes her own soul at birth. S/he begins living life that will shape her self. S/he

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will begin to live within the inhalations and exhalations of others around her. S/he will, in a sense, no longer only breathe the breath of h/er mother, but s/he will breathe the breath of the world around h/er. S/he will breathe the breath of history, moment, and expectation. S/he will breathe her own breath of acceptance or rejection of what is breathed upon and into h/er. S/he will become a person, an individual different from other persons. S/he will develop an identity and an ego. S/he will grow both physically and spiritually.

The air is alive with our spiritual selves with the mystery that makes us ourselves – love, lust, desire, will, fear, anger, greed, generosity, gratitude praise, awe, adoration. The air is alive with what we breathe into it. What words do we use our breath to speak? Do we use the breath to breathe back into the air what in Christianity are known as the fruits of the Spirit? : love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, humility, self-control, and faith. (Galatians 5:22) Do we even have faith any more in a world where we continue to fight stupid and useless wars, where evidence of the human capacity for barbarity takes our breath away. We are mute in the face of it. Is there a transcendent Divine that makes sense when we hear about food riots in Bangladesh, Egypt and in Haiti? Can there be a God of love when millions of people live in poverty in the richest nation that the world has ever known?

The Holy Spirit tells me yes. Perhaps this sacred breath breathed into my consciousness as I breathed my mother's breath in the womb. Perhaps this sacred breath breathed itself into me with my mother's praying tears at the moment of my birth. Perhaps the songs of faith and praise that a congregation of black voices singing, breathing hope and love into the air around me gives me a faith that cannot be denied and needs no scientific evidence. It is a hope that sees

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beyond sight that believes to see rather than seeing to believe. It is a spiritual self that was formed in its essence within community. Perhaps the Divine Mystery that is God and that is Love is the Holy Spirit that breathed its blessed breath onto me and into me and gives me the capacity to love. It gives me the breath to breathe the words “I love you” to my lover, to my friends, to my family, and even to my enemies.

The breath connects us. It is the tie that binds us to all living things; it ties us to all of creation. Our spiritual self comes into us at the moment of our birth and it leaves us at the moment of our death, but it does not die. It returns to its source. Thus, the spiritual self, the essential self, is not something that is contained inside the body; it is not something that lives inside the body. Rather the body lives inside our spiritual selves. The core of the physical body is its center. We strengthen that core by intention and attention and the effort to strengthen those core muscles. In contrast, the core of our spiritual body is outside of our singular selves. The core of our spiritual selves is an expansive consciousness that understands that the self is more than a skin sack of bones blood, nerve endings and muscles called by a proper name. The spiritual self is large and it is ever expanding as we become aware that the singular self – myself -- is bound to other selves through the breath, and I become them and they become me.

Thus, I am the Iraqi woman afraid to send her children to school for fear that they will be kidnapped. I am the woman in Darfur who risks rape whenever I go to find firewood. I am the Congolese and Bosnia soldier who rapes women as a tactic of war. I am the undocumented worker. I am the terrorist, and I am the grieving survivor of a victim of terror. I am the warrior

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returning home with post traumatic stress disorder. I am the beautiful one whose life is blest and highly favored. I am the forgotten lonely hopeless soul wandering the streets of some city not knowing who I am or where I am going. I am everything and everyone that I love; I am everything and everyone that I hate.

With this expanded spiritual consciousness, we understand that we strengthen our spiritual core, we hold onto our spiritual core by giving ourselves away. We give ourselves in service to the world. We give the gift of ourselves; we give the gift of our love, expecting nothing in return. We adopt a new identity, an ultimate identity that understands that we are all the children of a loving Creator who knows what we cannot and probably ought not know. We adopt an identity that understands that integrity is wholeness. And our wholeness comes from our connection with all of creation. Our wholeness comes from our own radical love. We find our hope and our courage in the knowledge that through this larger understanding of self, we can never fail, and we can never die.

Myself is and becomes the eternal breath of life.

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