

YOGA AS A PRACTICE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

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"A life of wholeness does not depend on what we experience.

Wholeness depends on how we experience our lives." – Desmond Tutu

We began the class lying on our backs, one hand on the belly and one on the chest. Our teacher, Laura, gently directed our focus inward and talked us toward becoming aware of our breath and of its movement in our bodies. She asked us to follow the cycle of our breath as our bellies rose with each inhale, as our breath filled our lungs' upper lobes, and as our chests and bellies then fell in sequence with each exhale.

As we continued in this pattern, and as Laura continued to draw our focus inward, she suggested that we think about what our bodies needed from us today. "Where might there be some place that needs extra attention?" she asked. "Keep feeling your breath and just try to listen to your body as you breathe."

"What is your body saying to you today?"

That was when I laughed out loud. My body was chewing me out big time. And though I quickly squelched my startled guffaw—it seemed so un-yoga-like—I continued to imagine the pissed-off voice of my body as though it were in some profanity-laden cartoon bubble: "&#%!@?!"

Who knew that a body could be so angry? Or that it could somehow make its angry voice so loud in my mind?

Of course, my body had good reason to be angry. For starters, I was just a few months post-mastectomy and still expecting a couple more surgeries. I had been on a medical roller coaster with no end yet in sight. With every bottomless drop and hairpin curve, I was left reeling and feeling utterly out of control. With multiple biopsies, the emotional slam of two separate malignancy diagnoses,

scores of doctors' appointments, and an endless array of tests, procedures, scans, and blood-draws, I found myself inside a body that I was no longer sure I wanted to inhabit. And then there was that empty space on my chest.

"What is your body trying to tell you? What does it want you to pay attention to?"

Tears began to roll down my cheeks. They came streaming from my eyes as suddenly and inexplicably as the laugh had come forth from my throat. But the tears were something I couldn't stop. They just kept coming, and I could feel them pooling in my ears.

The grief of my body flooded my awareness. Feeling the profound weight of so much sadness all at once, I could hardly bear to be there with it. I kept trying to turn my attention back to my breath, but by now, I was heaving and sobbing. Fearful that I would be disruptive of the class, I began to sit up and saw Laura walking toward me. I was expecting her to politely suggest that I come back another day, but wordlessly, she simply handed me a Kleenex box.

I stayed. And for the first time, I had some insight into the power of my own breath.

Since then, yoga has become part of my daily life. Though I had previously gone to yoga classes off and on, I always viewed yoga as a sort of fitness activity. Classes gave me a chance to stretch my body and gain flexibility while, simultaneously, they allowed my mind to enjoy a bit of space away from the hustle and bustle of lawyering, mothering, and daily managing. Those times were surely valuable, but post-mastectomy, as the consistency of my yoga practice increased, I began to see that yoga could be something more.

Exactly what more, I wasn't sure. But I knew it was a path I wanted to pursue.

Judith Lasater teaches that "the practice of yoga is fundamentally an act of kindness toward oneself." Kindness—this was something I needed—something my body ached for. And I had never even realized that such a deep ache was there until, finally, my body spoke to me that day in yoga class.

Though I couldn't process all that my body was trying to tell me at the time, and certainly couldn't put it into words, I knew intuitively that my body's sadness was about much more than the lost breast. And it was about more than all the other hellish days that cancer had brought. It was a deep, deep well of grief—a well that had been dug by sexual violence long before the cancer materialized.

My bodily integrity had been desecrated many years earlier when I was an adolescent church girl in Farmers Branch, Texas. Over the course of many months, I was repeatedly molested and raped by the church's youth minister.

Of course, those are just words. The technicolor filmstrips that sometimes start running in my head are far worse.

The minister's weapon was the faith that I held within my own heart. God's will and God's word became so twisted that I actually believed what the minister told me—that I was special and that I had been chosen by God to be a help-mate for the minister in his holy work. Like a fish in a barrel, I was trapped by the immutable boundaries of my own faith-filled identity. Who was I to doubt "God's will?" And in any event, any doubt I expressed was quickly dispelled with God's word: "Lean not unto thine own understanding."

There is no weapon more powerful than the "word of God" in the hands of a perverse pastoral con man who traps young true believers as prey. I was such a girl. If told "God wills it," I would do it.

For many years, the malignancy of what I experienced in the church of my childhood ate away at the core of my being. The impact of it was not only physically, psychologically and emotionally devastating, but also spiritually annihilating. My very soul had been sullied and subjugated. And though I could not have given voice to this at the time, I felt raped by God.

Of course, the traumatic impact derived from much more than the predatory acts of a single minister. The degradation of childhood rape was exponentially magnified by the community's long-continued effort to cover up such dastardly deeds.

As a kid, when I finally broke down uncontrollably one day at a piano lesson in the church sanctuary—when the black and white keys all merged together and my hands froze, when I told my piano teacher the gist of what had been happening and about my fear of going to hell—my piano teacher, who was also the church's music minister, told me I should never speak of it again. After that, the senior pastor told me I should rededicate my life to Christ. And the youth minister himself moved on to another church ... but not until I had been made to apologize to his wife, and not until he had the chance to pray over my prostrate body while purporting to cast Satan from me, and not until the senior pastor could praise him from the pulpit as a great man of God, and not until all of my church family had given him a farewell reception with their best casseroles and jello-molds.

Trauma experts have spoken to the extraordinary importance of social context in determining how people process traumatic events. By nature, human beings are resilient, and if traumatized people are supported by a caring community, they may often do quite well even after horrendous events. But when

traumas are inflicted on a child by someone who is supposed to take care of the child, and when the child experiences those traumas repeatedly, and when the child's community colludes to deny the reality, and when the child is not allowed to feel what he feels or give voice to what he knows, then the child's mind cannot process what has happened.

These are prime circumstances for giving rise to long-term trauma-related issues. For people who survive such prolonged, repeated traumas, and particularly for those who experience such traumas during vulnerable developmental periods, the impact is often more profound than is encompassed within the usual parameters of a post-traumatic-stress-disorder diagnosis. Researchers have coined the term "complex trauma" to refer to the more disruptive and all-pervasive constellation of problems—problems of mind, body and spirit—that derive from such traumas. They include such symptoms as hypervigilance, dissociation, chronic sleep disturbances, nightmares, persistent feelings of worthlessness, emotional numbing, feelings of shame and self-blame that generalize to daily life, an impaired ability to sustain close relationships, disconnection from others, and a rupture of one's most basic systems of meaning.

Often, this sort of trauma imprints itself in areas of the brain that are not connected to cognitive processes. It imprints itself as a form of body memory. As many have said about the effects from such trauma: "The issues are in the tissues."

When my own daughter approached the same age I had been at the time of the abuse, my own issues pushed themselves to the forefront, and I started to slowly come apart at the seams. Piece by piece, I began to take down my disjointed memories from that dark and dusty back shelf in my brain, and I couldn't cope with them. Even in isolated pieces, I couldn't bear to look at them. All I felt was the mother-bear instinct of knowing that if anyone were to do to my own daughter what was done to me, my fury would know no bounds. Thinking of it as a mother made me weep for the young girl that I myself had once been.

With counseling, as I began to understand the horrifically abusive nature of what was done to me, and as I began to realize the enormous impact it had in my life, and as I recalled that the minister had simply moved on to be the children's minister at a bigger church, I became desperate to warn people so that other kids might not suffer the same horrors as I had. Yet when I contacted police, they told me it would be impossible to pursue criminal charges since so much time had passed.

This, of course, is typical of many child sex-abuse cases. The very nature of the harm is such that victims often bury their memories for decades. Then, by the time the child grows up and becomes capable of psychologically dealing with the trauma, it is too late for criminal prosecution. With short statutes of limitation in many states, it is as though society itself has conspired in denying the reality of the harm inflicted by child sex abuse.

Since criminal prosecution was impossible, I was elated when I learned that the same music minister was still at my childhood church. I felt certain that my old piano teacher would want to help me. I figured he had probably felt bad about things all these years and wished that he had done things differently. I even imagined he would be glad to hear from me and to know that I was okay.

I was dead wrong.

He was not at all happy to hear from me. Though he confirmed my story, he said I had no business talking about it. Then, with the help of an attorney referred by Texas denominational officials, both he and the church threatened to sue me if I continued to talk about my past.

When I got that letter, it literally took my breath away. They knew what I was saying was true, and yet rather than doing anything about the minister who molested me, the church was threatening *me*.

I felt as though a bomb had exploded in my head. It was a sort of preemptive strike, and it was very effective. The church seemed determined to knock me out fast and swift, and for a while, they did. But I just couldn't stop thinking about all the kids who might suffer if this guy were still a minister. So eventually I rallied, and as I continued to pursue things, I wound up facing all manner of misdirection and intimidation tactics.

For example, in response to my inquiry, the Southern Baptist Convention wrote that it had no record that the man was still in ministry. Yet, months later, I learned that in fact he was still a children's minister at a prominent Baptist church in Florida. When I first got that piece of news and saw his picture in the church's online directory, my body physically revolted. I threw up on the spot. Even though he was still working with kids, and even though my story was readily substantiated, there was no one in Baptist leadership who thought it mattered enough to do anything about it—other than to try to silence me.

I also learned that the music minister had actually known about the youth minister's abuse of me long before I fell apart at my piano lesson. He knew because the youth minister himself had told him. He had told him, not only about the abuse, but that he was afraid a congregant had seen him with me in a

“compromising position.” But rather than reporting his colleague to the police, the music minister had simply stayed quiet, allowing the youth minister’s abuse of me to escalate. That knowledge, and the realization that the abuse could have been stopped so much sooner, left me physically gasping.

As I gathered more and more pieces of information, I realized that there had been many others in my church and community who knew what was done to me as a kid—who knew and kept quiet; who knew and didn’t report it to police; who knew and never even attempted to see to it that I might get some counseling or help. Those who likely knew included deacons in my church, fathers of my friends, probably some of my friends’ mothers as well, another Baptist minister at a neighboring church, and even kin. With every piece of the puzzle gained, I felt pieces of myself being rent asunder.

There was no doubting my story. Too many people knew. Yet despite contacting 18 Southern Baptist leaders in four different states—Texas, Georgia, Florida and Tennessee—not a single person would help me. In denominational offices of every state he had worked in, and at national headquarters, there was no one who would do anything.

At denominational headquarters in Texas, the youth minister’s name had been placed in a file of clergy for whom there was “substantial evidence” of abuse. But the file cabinet stayed closed with its contents kept secret. No one would do anything to remove the man from ministry, to stop him from working with kids, or even to warn people in the pews about his past.

The weight of so many uncaring responses took a toll on me. To repeatedly absorb the shockwaves of so many betrayals was retraumatizing, and the institutionalized callousness was dehumanizing. Of course, this isn’t unusual. This sort of retraumatization is a typical pattern of what many clergy sex-abuse survivors experience.

In adulthood, when we begin to talk about something so ugly, there is often the unspoken expectation that we should take on the burden of healing not only ourselves, but also the community and family. And the way we are expected to do that is by denying the reality of the horror of what was done to us.

“If it were really so bad, why didn’t you talk about it sooner?”

“It happened such a long time ago, why bring it up now?”

“Let bygones be bygones.”

“You’re only hurting people by resurrecting the past; you should live in the present.”

When confronted with a history of child sex abuse in their own family, their own church, or their own community, far too many people turn to a seemingly endless array of victim-chastising clichés as a means to soothe their own consciences, to sidestep an awful truth about someone they trusted, or to avoid confronting their own blind-eyed keep-it-quiet complicity. Perhaps the people who say such things do not consciously intend to cause pain, and perhaps they are merely manifesting the oft-seen human tendency to lapse into denial in the face of unacceptable truths. But whatever the reason, humans have a tendency to coalesce around silence and denial in these contexts, and the effect is devastating for abuse victims.

For those who are seeking to heal from such long-standing traumas, these sorts of minimizations and denials become impossible. If we are to move forward with our lives, we can no longer engage with such denials. So, by speaking the truth of our own life stories, we often wind up being cast aside from the tribe. More often than not, the tribe prefers the quiet familiar terrain of the self-told soft lies rather than the seismically altered terrain wrought by the hard truths of child sex abuse.

Ultimately, I count myself as a survivor, not only because I survived horrific child sex abuse at the hands of a minister, but also because, as an adult, I persisted in my truth even when it hurt like hell and because I survived every attempt of a powerful, heavily-funded religious institution to try to silence me.

Eventually, my story generated so much negative publicity that the man who had repeatedly molested and raped me resigned from ministry. The media attention, along with my website and blog, brought hundreds of other Baptist clergy sex-abuse survivors to my inbox. Their stories of abuse and cover-ups were all so similar, and all so distressing. Not only had they all suffered terrible traumas in childhood, but almost all of them had also dealt with the retraumatizing betrayals of churches, families and communities.

With all their hard stories, I wept.

I wept for their sufferings and I wept for their betrayals. I wept for the ruptures of their families and relationships. I wept for their loss of trust, safety and worthiness. I wept for their battles with addiction, suicide ideation, and post-traumatic stress. I wept for all the senseless savagery inflicted on so many more kids when so many ministers could have been stopped so much sooner. I wept for all the religiously fueled vitriol that was flung at myself and others as the truth of our stories came into the light of day. And as the broad systemic scope

of the problem became apparent, I wept for my own diminished faith in the shared bonds of a caring humanity.

How to set things right when the wounds run so deep?

Cancer is what brought me to the place of really engaging with that question. Perhaps it is because cancer and sexual violence share a commonality of seizing bodily control. Perhaps it is because dealing with cancer resurrected the earlier traumas in my body—something I'm told is not unusual with cancer patients. Or perhaps it is because life now seems more precious than ever, and I know that I have already had too much of my life's energy stolen by the Sisyphean task of trying to hold together the pieces of a body and mind torn asunder by childhood sexual trauma.

Whatever the explanation, from the get-go I intuitively sensed that there was a connection between the traumas of my childhood and the cancers of my adulthood. And I felt a powerful motivation to try to more effectively deal with those traumas so as to try to lessen my risks for a cancer recurrence.

I would have preferred to be wrong, but my intuition wound up matching up with medical science. The groundbreaking ACE study, first reported in 1998, brought staggering proof of how those who face serious traumas before the age of 18 also wind up facing an increased risk for serious health problems in adulthood.¹ The body of data that was gathered in the ACE study—data derived from more than 17,000 participants—demonstrated a strong correlation between certain “adverse childhood experiences” and the leading causes of serious illness and early death in adulthood.

So far, more than 50 scientific articles have been published, analyzing various aspects of the ACE data. Though there remain scientific gaps in understanding the precise causal chain, the ACE study has unequivocally shifted our understanding of childhood trauma and its effect on the body.

Traumatic childhood experiences trigger in the body a cascading process of neurobiological reactions which, though they may be adaptive in the context of short term threats, can do great harm when chronically activated. Two major systems of the body—the autonomic nervous system and the endocrine system—are affected and malfunction. This of course is a very general description of something far more complicated, but what is important to know is that science

¹ The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study is an ongoing research study “[l]inking childhood trauma to long-term health and social consequences.” See The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, <http://acestudy.org> (accessed Aug. 9, 2014).

now recognizes the reality that complex trauma lodges itself in the body's physiological processes.

Thus, trauma affects us, not only on a psychological level, but also on a physical level. It is not "all in our heads" but rather resides in the body and suffuses our very cells.

Because trauma lodges itself in the body, we need body-oriented healing modalities. Yoga is such a modality and, for that reason, it can be a powerful tool for healing. It is not a substitute for medical interventions or for counseling, but it is a powerful additional tool that can support and energize the healing of trauma wounds. Further, while yoga carries the component of a physical body-based practice, it can also transcend physicality with its effects on the mind and emotions.

We are embodied creatures and so it is through our bodies that we experience the world and even our very selves. For people with serious histories of childhood trauma, this experience of embodiment is often distorted and hijacked, as though they don't even own themselves anymore. Detached from the relationship with their bodies, such severely traumatized people often lose the most primal sense of safety inside their own bodies.

In order to heal this primal loss, the person must recover a feeling of safety within. But it must be a bodily perception of safety, and not merely a cognitively reasoned perception. Yoga can help in the process of recovering safety within ourselves—of coming home to our own bodies—and of restoring peace within. Indeed, the very word *yoga*, which comes from ancient Sanskrit, means "to yoke" or "to unite." For thousands of years, this notion of unity has been one of yoga's most central teachings, and yoga practices have been about helping individuals to feel wholeness by uniting body, mind and spirit.

Yoga can effectively help us access the nonverbal realm of trauma within the body. By engaging with the now of a daily yoga asana practice, we can slowly teach our bodies to feel the grounded safety of the present moment. And by learning to disengage our bodies' "fight or flight" responses, we can also learn to hold stillness within for long enough that we may forge stronger connections to others.

This fact of yoga as an effective tool for trauma-care is a fact backed by strong evidence. After pilot programs funded by the Pentagon, and based on the clinical results of those programs, the military is now incorporating yoga to aid with trauma-treatment in many veterans' centers and military installations.

A regular yoga practice can help on multiple levels: it can lower cortisol, the stress hormone; it can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which is calming; and it can deactivate the limbic brain, which is often overactive in people with a history of serious trauma. Thus, just as our bodies hold within them the trauma, so too do they hold the seeds of our own self-healing.

Fundamentally, yoga is a practice of self-care. In cultivating a daily practice of going to the mat, we can send to our minds and bodies a message that we matter. This is the place where we tend to our inner selves. Not only do we tend to ourselves physically, but also mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

With yoga, we strive to practice *ahimsa*—a Sanskrit word meaning “nonviolence” and “nonharming.” This is a core concept of yoga and a core commitment of a yoga practice. And while many of us have little difficulty in committing to nonviolence against others, we often bring to bear the most intense and undue harshness on ourselves. For me, yoga brought with it a longing to be oh-so-gentle with myself and to let go of all my trauma-induced self-loathing, self-shame and self-criticism. And with that longing came the pragmatic teaching of a daily practice, which has helped me to develop a sense of self-acceptance. Yoga has helped me learn that, instead of detaching from uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, I can sometimes open the door to them without being overpowered by them. I believe this is a critical element of healing for those with complex trauma issues. And as I have slowly learned to reconnect with kindness to my own core self, I have also become more attuned to the thread of my connection within the invisible web that binds humanity.

Something that both cancer and sexual assault take from us is control over our bodies. Yoga, on the other hand, is physically empowering and returns control to us. We exercise control, not only over our body’s physical movements with yoga, but also over our breath. Indeed, the breath is at the very core of any yoga practice. It is what yokes body and mind together.

“If you can breathe, you can do yoga.” That’s what I often say to people when they tell me they aren’t flexible enough for yoga. It’s not about pretzel-poses; it’s about the breath. And it’s about using the breath to find that “ahhh” moment of peace when the mind is still.

By controlling our breath—its rate, its quality, and its deepness—and by coordinating the breath with bodily movements, we can exert some control over our feelings. Slow, mindful breathing can balance the nervous system and bring a sense of calm. In this way, yoga can be a tool for setting things right within our own selves. Rather than allowing our nattering minds to make our breath

anxious, we can instead use our breath to repeatedly send to the mind a message of "all is okay right here and right now."

In so many clergy molestation cases, we have seen that, in the churches and communities in which such abuse occurs, little care or thought seems to be given to the needs of the victims. It is as though the crime itself, if spoken of, renders the victims into untouchables. We are left bleeding out in the sands of a spiritual desert while others ride their donkeys right past us. This is the typical pattern. When such grievous wounds are inflicted from *within* a faith community, then the faith community does not care to look too closely, and so it does not try to bind the wounds.

I yearn for the day when we will see more cases that defy this pattern, but I know that we cannot idly wait for that day to come. The bleeding must be staunched, and so we ourselves must do the job of binding up our own wounds. To accomplish that, we can extend peace and wholeness, compassion and care to our own most inner selves. And though no other form of justice may be possible, we ourselves can engage in a form of self-restorative justice.

So how does the concept of "justice" fit into the practice of yoga? And what constitutes justice anyway? Is it a punishment? A judgment? An amount of money?

Or is it an internal thing? A feeling that things are being set right?

The legal system speaks to only one sort of justice, i.e., justice according to the parameters provided by the applicable law. Yet, for many child sex abuse survivors, even when the law has dispensed its allotted measure of justice, they still feel a void. Even when their claims have been successfully prosecuted and the perpetrator imprisoned, the trauma still infiltrates their bodies and minds. Likewise with successful civil suits, even those who recover monetary judgments often report that there is no end to their anguish. The judgment does not automatically bring a halt to their depression and insomnia, and nor does it restore their shattered trust or their sense of bodily safety.

I believe strongly that, whenever possible, every child sex abuse case should be pursued within the legal system, both criminally and civilly. However, I also know that, for far too many, this form of justice is *not* possible; the doors to the courthouse are effectively closed. And even for the minority whose claims may fit within the narrow framework for prosecution under the law, they nevertheless will often report that legal justice alone does not bring them any sense of wholeness. So even when legal justice can be obtained, legal justice alone seldom brings restoration.

No form of justice on this earth is perfect. So, the fact that our own efforts at restorative justice may yield imperfect results does not mean that we should not pursue them. To the contrary, every movement of energy that we can muster toward our own version of restorative justice is energy well spent in reclaiming our lives.

Laws, policies and procedures are all critically important for the prevention of child sex abuse and the protection of kids. But ultimately, even when the law fails us, and even when denominational policies ignore us, and even when church procedures betray us, what life is really about is how we live.

Justice is not merely about some punishment that some other person, such as a judge, may impose on the perpetrator. It can also be about something we do for ourselves. We can retake control of our internal world and shift our experience of the world as we direct it. We are not dependent on some other person to tell us what constitutes justice or when justice is done. Rather, we can create justice for ourselves.

This does not mean that we will ever be completely healed. With such complex traumas, healing may be a lifelong process, and perhaps we can never be fully restored. Certainly, there is no possibility for becoming the person we might have been if not for the terrible wrong. But though no church may ever be able to give us sanctuary after such church-based horrors, we can nevertheless create sanctuary for ourselves.

Yoga can be a path for creating sanctuary because it can help to restore us toward feeling whole and safe within our bodies. In this way, yoga can become a practice of self-restorative justice.

For sure, this picture of justice is not complete. But it is a picture of what justice may look like for the portion over which we ourselves may be able to exercise some control. By doing what we can to satisfy our need for making things right—right within our own bodies, minds, and spirits—we can bring a process of restorative justice to ourselves.

Ultimately, yoga can help restore us to the present experience of our own lives. And with renewed presence of body, mind and spirit, we can tap into the fullness of our own life-force and energy.

This sort of restorative justice is not legal justice, but rather it is the sort of justice that focuses on restoring what was taken away. Legal justice is an imperfect tool that may or may not bring about a desired result but which typically falls far short of restoring the victim to wholeness. Restorative justice is not a

perfect tool either, but it can at least attempt a more personal and holistically healing result.

Restorative justice asks: "What do you need to heal your life? What do you need to live your most authentic full life?"

Yoga answers: "What is your body saying to you today?"²

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- 2 The author would like to point the reader to the following materials, which she referenced in the writing of this article:

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