"WHAT'S THE FIRST WORD YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORD **YOGA?**"

By Ginni Robie

This is a question on the intake students complete before stepping into their first yoga class with me. Is your word "NOTforME!" Here is a sampling of the answers from 23 years' worth of intakes: Exercise, Stretching, Peace, Quiet, Flexibility, Joy, Union, Breathing, Calm, Relax, Mindfulness, Awareness. These are all from people who had previously practiced and knew what to expect. To a Yoga Instructor, these words could be music to the ears. People who truly understand what Yoga is capable of creating. People who will know what you mean when you say words like Balasana and Savasana and Namaste. These are those who will join in. Step right up! Let the flow begin!

Then there are the newbie's responses…Pretzels, Meh (which I think is akin to "Whatever"), Pain, Yogurt (Yogurt???), Om, Hard, Boring, Sweat, OUCH! Oh dear! What put these thoughts into people's heads????

Another important question on that intake is "Why are you taking this class?" Those who have practiced before gave the same answers as they did for the first question. New to a class were less Yoga-like in their responses. "I have no clue." "My sister made me."

Yoga means union. Practicing is the opportunity to let your busy mind pay attention to (create a union with) just two things instead of a hundred: one, your breathing and two, your body. Once you figure that out, it <u>can</u> be pretty sweet.

But truthfully, before I embraced Yoga, my mindset was in line with the newbies (well, except for the Yogurt). I believed you had to twist yourself into a pretzel in order to "do" Yoga. Which would be hard to do and would be painful. I am NOT a fan of sweating, but understood sweating was expected, at least in some styles of yoga. Chanting was foreign to me so Om was a bit unsettling. And I was the person who didn't continue with exercise classes (or any classes) because they became boring. Just doing the same thing over and over again. (Though I have to admit, in some styles of Yoga, you always do the same thing over and over again.)

A late 1990s Fibromyalgia Syndrome (FMS) diagnosis led me to give Yoga a try. Yoga was one of the few things at that time recommended to deal with some of the discomforts of FMS. I got a book from the library showing very skinny people with very serious faces wearing leotards. This was not appealing at all. I'm not skinny, look horrible in leotards and I wanted/needed something that would make me feel better, make me smile. Four months later Kathy in my New Jersey church had earned her certification to teach and offered a class in the church's narthex. I went. And I was hooked! I ordered a bunch of Yoga VHS tapes (how old am I??) so that I could do something every night, but always different. I did NOT want to give myself the opportunity to get bored! At first, I think it somewhat satisfied the dormant gymnast/ballerina in me. There was movement with grace. I learned a lot from Kathy. And she, seeing that I was truly loving the practice, invited me to teach when she couldn't. And I loved teaching.

For the next 5 years, I attended or taught her Tuesday night class without fail. And then I moved to Madrid, Maine. *Where's the Yoga?????* There was none to be found. 3 months later I learned a yoga class was beginning at the fitness center in Rangeley. Sue McPhee, who happened to be the wife of my realtor, had taken a correspondence course to earn certification and teach. At her first class I eagerly rolled out my mat in the big room with the large mirror and windows facing the amazing Rangeley Lake, placed my neatly folded blanket on my mat and took a seat. Ahhh……. At the end of the class, Sue advised me to get certified so that we could

team teach. 200 hours later I was certified in Hatha Yoga and Sue, who really just wanted to get Yoga into Rangeley, waved goodbye and left the class in my (slightly nervous) hands. And so began what had apparently been a calling I had not recognized. AND with a side benefit of meeting beautiful, amazing, and loving people who became my friends.

Over the years, I was recertified, but even more important I started studying different styles of yoga. Vini Yoga, Ashtanga, Vinyasa, Yin, Jivamukti, Round Mat, Prenatal, Children's, Chair, and Kundalini. My exploration took me much further than if I had settled on just one or two styles. I wanted Yoga to be available to everyone regardless of their age or condition. I knew there was a style everyone would love. There really is yoga for everyone. Plus, I refused to get bored!

Over those years, I made certain things clear to my students:

- "Not everyone has the hips to be a pretzel no matter how many years they've practiced."
- "I hate sweating, so there will be no sweating here, at least not on purpose."
- "If it hurts today, it's definitely going to hurt tomorrow, so don't hurt today!"
- "This pose may not be great for you, so let's try this one instead."
- I've said nobody HAS to chant: "You can always just listen."
- I've told students they would never get the same class twice in a row from me…there will always be something different: "I don't want anyone getting bored." (Boredom seems to be a theme with me.)

Yoga can be meaningful and comfortable and fun all at the same time. Something everyone can enjoy. Some prefer just the physical aspect of it. Some appreciate the spiritual component of the practice. Some come to appreciate the philosophies, the ethical guidelines of Yoga including Contentment and Truthfulness and Non-Violence. Some prefer challenging routines, and we can make that happen, too. Whatever your reason, keep it interesting and joyful. Smile! Laugh! Laugh at yourself and laugh at some of the silly things you do. And smile some more. In a class you may be in a room full of people but you are taking a class for yourself, not the others. Make those 75 minutes the best of your day. Make the class be the best it can be for you. Make it so you enjoy it enough to return. I doubt your instructor will ask you to leave because you are smiling too much.

After 23 years I still practice with students that started just about the same time I led my first Maine class. For 17 of those years, I was the traveling Yoga instructor. 3-4 times a week in Rangeley, and Classes in Weld, Farmington, Kingfield, Salem and in my own studio in Madrid. I am not bored and I guess they are not, either. Covid came along and classes, as did so many things, stopped. We resumed classes in October, 2020. People were desperate to return. With masks and plenty of space between mats and sanitizers throughout the room, we did very quiet Yoga. No heavy breathing. And only in the Madrid studio. People came from all those towns and beyond. Once you give it a try, Yoga can be one of the best things that happens for you. It's worth the trip.

Please understand…this is a plug for Yoga, not for my classes. This is plug for the kind of Yoga that is kind to everyone and appropriate for all. From the least experienced and/or able to the advanced practitioner. And I completely respect practitioners who want classes dedicated to the seriousness of a practice. For me, however, practicing with a smile is best. Whoever you are, newbie or seasoned yogi, find a class! If it's just not right for you, find another or talk to the instructor. I expect that person will want to know what will keep you coming. And also understand, Yogurt is not required.