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Feeling the Way Ahead

By Jae Gruenke

After the World Trade Center came down, the only New Yorkers who searched for inner peace in the lotus position already had the habit. When the Crunch chain opened its gyms to nonmembers in the days after September 11, their hardcore workouts – spinning, cardio, dance, and sculpting classes – swelled to double and triple the usual sizes while yoga attendance held level. “I would attribute this to people wanting to escape their feelings through fitness classes that don’t necessitate deep thought,” said Christine Carrigan, Crunch’s regional group fitness director.

Impromptu communities coalesced in familiar spaces. Gyms, yoga schools, and meditation centers wove instant fellowship out of extant members, a modicum of compatibility, and dire need.

While a sudden conversion of the entire city to holistic movement practices did not occur, practitioners of a range of body-mind disciplines invoked tools equal to a trauma of this magnitude. In the wake of the inconceivable, they offered specific strategies to treat the initial shock and ongoing stress.

“I would be very upset and [then] I would do tai chi. [Afterwards] I would have the same concern for others but [feel] more grounded, more connected to my body,” says Margaret Matsumoto, senior teacher at the New York School of T’ai Chi Chuan. “While my emotions are still very prominent, they’re integrated with my body, which continues to move and breathe. The kind of awareness tai chi cultivates is something you can seek to have with you – and comfort yourself with having – no matter what you’re doing.”

Michael Krugman, developer of the Sounder Sleep System, was also able to comfort and ground himself following the attacks. “The whole thing – the tragedy and grief and shock – affected me a lot, in ways I didn’t know about and couldn’t track.” Three times a day, and whenever he hears the internal sirens of stress and anxiety, he moves his hands, shoulders, head, and eyes in a sequence he calls somatic focusing, so subtle and gentle that it can be done at a desk in full view of colleagues.

“I do them and I can feel the tied of stress hormones ebb,” says Krugman, a somatic sleep specialist. “The initial shock response is natural, but it may persist for a long time, and that’s what’s harrowing. These techniques help you bring yourself back to a peaceful state so you can respond effectively to new circumstances.”

Humans’ natural response to a threat, Krugman points out, is to contract all their muscles and hold their breath. “Walk down any street and you could see in people’s bodies and faces that they were still recoiling from the attack. A regular practice lets you find those contracted places and let them go. If you’re feeling fear or rage, that’s good. But as you process those feelings you need to be able to moderate the damaging effects on your body.”

Cyndi Lee, director and founder of Om Yoga Center on West 14th Street, used yoga to keep feelings of fear and anger from clamping down. “The extreme emotional chaos that I feel is processed through the practice. The experience we’ve all had is in our nervous systems, in our bodies. Because of the

nature of yoga – the breathing, the movement – the experience can move through us, and there's the possibility of transforming it into something else."

Reverend Allan Lokos, interfaith minister and Vipassana meditation teacher, worked the 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. shift for an impromptu organization of clergy, placing rescue workers from out of town in New York City hotels and providing counseling. Despite his exhaustion, meditation kept him calm and focused. To keep his mind from extrapolating mental pain into extended suffering, he relied on his own practice to sidestep obsessive worrying. "With meditation we can stay with pain, and it alleviates much faster because it's just pain."

Dance meditation innovator Dunya Dianne McPherson, who lives in Nolita and teaches in Manhattan and Brooklyn, has made a point of moving "receptively" since the attack, responding improvisationally to her feelings and impulses, coordinating her movement and breath, and accepting her experience of the tragedy. "My practice has been the only place where I've had ease or a sense of peace. It's a very different sense than in other times – I feel peaceful but not as innocent. The peacefulness has more dimension to it because I realized the dimension of pain. It feels more full and even more welcome than it ever has."

Reverend Ariel Sebastian, a registered drama therapist, ordained interfaith minister, and certified bereavement facilitator who helped out at Chelsea Piers, defused her anxiety and sadness by calling friends who simply listened while she told her stories and cried herself out. "It's beneficial to talk about it, because if you keep the darkness there, it will fester." She employs an array of coping tools, from swimming and massage to meditation, journal writing, and prayer. "These practices, in a time of being out of control, are wonderful teachings on how to be in control of what you have, to move from anxiety to peace. They also create communities, and right now it's important to be together.

"People are just coming out of shock," says Reverend Sebastian. "I would encourage them to talk, to process, not to judge each other."

In the initial days after the disaster, nonsectarian community meeting places like Union Square, free from dogma, seemed the safest – people shunned gatherings where others might tell them how they must feel. But beginning a week after the tragedy the Columbia Center for Meditation and Healing reported receiving 50 percent more calls than usual. In the same period, the New York Open Center hosted an unprecedented number of new comers in their meditation room, constantly fielding the inquiry "What is this place?" In response they hosted free midday healing circles weekdays through October, guided by local practitioners of every stripe. The New York Shambhala Center, a Buddhist meditation and study center in Chelsea, saw a steady trickle of strangers through its doors, as did New York Yoga. Says Reverend Sebastian, "Some people are now realizing how fragile we are. And that doesn't have to be a bad thing. It's actually an opportunity to cultivate a really meaningful life. And it's time to learn to take care of ourselves, individually as well as collectively."