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What starts in the balcony eventually comes down to earth

In a land far, far away from the pandemic, I was at a Rita Coolidge concert. During her introduction to a personal song about her grandma, someone in the back far reaches of the highest balcony let out a loud, slow YAWN.

Without skipping a beat, Rita said, "Sorry if I'm keeping you up."

The audience laughed. Some miffed fans turned and squinted with beady eyes toward that dark balcony.

Rita, pro that she is, just carried on with her intro. But before she started singing again, she glanced up high in the direction of that yawner and with a soft touch of humility said, "Try to stay up. You might get something out of it."

Ripples of laughter from the crowd as we relaxed into our seats



YO JOAN!
Joan Budilovsky

and proceeded to stay awake.

Now, if this were a different time and she was a different person, she could have cut this yawner down a peg or two – the way seasoned comics treat hecklers – for being so incredibly rude.

However, her response addressed the inappropriateness without belittling the other person. There was a humble kindness to it. She even went on to magnificently sing a moving grandma song.

Little did Rita know the yawner up yonder was severely disabled.

Through the glare of bright lights, she couldn't see the group of fans sitting way up in the darkened nose-bleed seats. Many of them couldn't control their movements.

And one, for a moment, couldn't control his voice.

After the show, I was in the elevator with that big yawner, ever grateful for Rita's talent. We hummed her sweet songs together, making them ours as we headed the wheelchairs out of the theatre and into the night – a night she helped us make it through.

Perhaps if more backstories were known, compassions would increase. And if our personal trials were more transparent to others, those strange blunders of ours would be easily forgiven. Do you think?

But we can't always see the dark balconies from the stages of our lives. Nor can we know the extensive history of every experience or person we encounter. Heck, it can take a lifetime or two just to figure out our own history.

Compassion, humility, kindness – there's something to be said for the practice of these traits. As we journey into 2022, I'm sure we'll find an abundance of opportunities to practice these sterling qualities toward others and also to ourselves.

It's mighty good to know practice makes perfect.

Happy New Year!

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It's February and time to bare your sole!

The month of love is here! Whether you're in love or looking for it, here's an exercise to get you moving in the right direction. It involves your cute little toes. So take off your socks and let's have some fun playing footsie in February!

Sit in a comfortable chair. Cross the right leg over the left and let your right knee fall out to the side.

Bring your left hand to the right foot. Interlace your fingers with your toes. Feel the stretch in your toes when you do this.

As you hold your foot in this way, rotate the ankle. Slow rotations. Inhale slowly in one full circle. Then reverse the direction and exhale slowly in a full circle of the foot.

Continue this for several breaths. As your breath calms and lengthens, increase to two slow rotations on the inhale and two slow rotations in the opposite direction on the exhale.

After some time with this foot, release your hold and change feet. Cross your left leg over the right. Bring your right hand to the left foot and here we go again!

Interlace your fingers with the toes of the left foot and begin slow breaths and rotations of this foot and ankle.



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No rush. Lengthen your breaths. Slow your movements down.

Watch if any negative self-talk gets in your way. For example, maybe you're not able to cross your legs – try putting them up on a chair or ottoman. Maybe you're not able to interlace your fingers with your toes – change self-criticism to simple loving rotations of your ankles and toes. Maybe you're not able to move your feet at all – visualize the movement with your breath. Close your eyes and visualize. Slow deep breaths.

Everything is possible – it's the month of love! Here's to creative energies soaring. You deserve a hand ... to your feet! Take a bow. BRAVO!

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Watch for those subtle signals happening right now

The big events in life pack power – weddings, funerals, anniversaries, birthdays. They tend to be seen as life-changing markers. Yet it's the subtle experiences that shape us into creating the grand ones. Those subtle life changers are happening on a regular basis – even possibly right in this very moment.

For example:

- Your warm glance toward someone may be the beginning of a life-changing relationship.
- Your kind words may be the catalyst for someone deciding between a negative or positive action.
- The way you react to a child's behavior may influence the child's actions later.



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• The way you read a poem may lift the spirits of someone who is depressed.

Subtle movements can be quite powerful.

I taught yoga for decades and it was (and is) the subtleties of the postures that make the difference – the movement within the holding of a yoga pose.

Although so much emphasis can be put on conquering a headstand, there's really no ending to the pose because you're actually moving as you're hold-

ing. By this I mean you're watching and listening as your body speaks to you. The more difficult the pose, the deeper must be your capacity to listen to the subtle aspects of your being.

This is hard to do because that big as a house ego gets involved. Aha! I can do a headstand! I'm cool! But it's the humility in the acceptance that opens the body into exploring the deeper aspects of the pose. Going up into a headstand is simply a feat. Actually listening while in every aspect of the pose takes one to the next level of understanding.

In this type of listening questions come up. What is my breath like? Is it calm? Shallow? Steady? Erratic? Am I balanced? Is my neck taking on too

much pressure? Are my arms strong? Are my stomach muscles engaged? Is my back overarching? The questions, the self-discoveries, go on and on.

So here's a simple exercise to help you clearly experience a headstand type of strength in subtle form. I saved it for the end of this column so you can keep your eyes closed for a few moments after reading. Go ahead and give this a try:

Close your beautiful eyes.

Relax your eyelids.

Watch the wave of relaxation enter your face.

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For example, in 2020, the U.S. produced 18.4 million barrels of oil a day

Gov. JB Pritzker recently proposed a one-year pause in Illinois'

However, they said, the sales tax increases as the price of fuel goes up,

tax on gas, even as a temporary measure.

What to do when the world seems to be going batty

Not only is listening to constant news addictive but it can create a sense of helplessness as to what to do to help bring some sanity into all the craziness. The problems are massive, and then combine them with a sense of fear that the craziness (violence) easily could spread to home base.

So where does one start? I've got some ideas on how to handle these significant problems and welcome hearing your ideas, too.

1. Have an emotional catharsis

Mental illness is a big subject these days and certainly not one to be taken lightly. For those of us not yet ready to be put into straightjackets, I've got a suggestion that Gestalt therapists have been using for decades – SCREAM! Go into a large open field and yell to the skies. I wouldn't recommend doing this in your home because neighbors, as great as they may be, may not understand the therapeutic value (even



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though they've probably had more than a few meltdowns themselves). Try not to direct your overactive vocal cords at a person or pet. If this has happened, apology quickly. You're better than that. And certainly that living being you're screaming at is, too.

2. Focus on breath

Try Box Breathing:

4 count exhale.

4 count hold breath.

4 count inhale.

4 count hold breath.

Consciously relax your facial muscles throughout, particularly when holding the breath.

Box Breathing comes out of Vedic literature from India about 1500 BCE. It

was noted then and now as an effective way to reduce anxiety and focus the mind. Navy Seals training calls this "tactical breathing." It's taught as a way to be calm and focused in combat.

3. Get involved in social services

Ask your church how you can help better the problems that concern you locally and/or globally. If it doesn't have something that addresses your concerns, maybe you can start a group yourself. You're not alone. Rest assured there's someone else worrying about the same problems you are.

Find an organization that already is doing what you want to do. Google can be an incredible way to get information on service organizations. If you don't have transportation, there are ways to get involved and help from your living room.

4. Artistic expression

Paint, draw, sing, write, dance,

crafts, yoga, tai chi. Find ways to express yourself that are safe and non-competitive so as to allow your inner self to shine. Express yourself!

5. Escape to the Inner Himalayas

Meditate. This is a way to clear the mind so your creative ideas become more centered. Simply find a quiet corner somewhere to sit comfortably and focus on your breath. When competing thoughts or disturbances enter your mind, let these thoughts, these disturbances, exhale through your breath. Watch the simple movement of your precious breath. If chaos rules all around you, just a few simple breaths of complete focus can help you in determining the best way to move forward.

And we all want to move forward.

When Joan Budilovsky is not screaming in an open field somewhere, she can be reached at her website, Yoyoga.com.

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When gossip turns its ugly head toward you

Have you ever experienced unfair gossip? Perhaps it's happened at work or in school, between neighbors, at a party, a sporting event, online, or in any of the many ways and places we communicate. Gossip can insidiously take a grip and distort reality further than it already is.

Some studies have shown gossip actually can be good for the psyche. Can you believe it strengthens viewpoints and builds bonds in friendships? I'd have to read those studies further, but, in my opinion, that sounds like crazy glue.

Although a coping strategy better than Ben & Jerry's Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough is hard to come by, here is an additional helpful tip if you think you're being gossiped about: don't take



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it so personally.

There's an abundance of competing stressors in the world. Negative things said about you are most likely coming out of a source with more pressing problems. Gossip takes us away from our own trials and tribulations – even if for a fleeting moment.

If you're feeling down, move around

Save your stews for the pot. Movement lifts the body and mind. Take a brisk walk. Go to the gym. Find ways to physically work off your frustra-

tions. You'll look and feel better for it. Go for the gold! Be kind to yourself.

This may be the hardest of all, particularly when there's an odd feeling of nastiness swirling around. It's easy to get sucked into the quicksand of negativity with thoughts such as, "Maybe they're right?" However, gossip gives the illusion that the person being gossiped about is of lesser value. You're not. With patient and kind persistence, your personal lotus flower eventually will work its way up through the gossipy mud and bloom above it all.

Ask yourself, 'What's going right?'

Focus on that. Perhaps you didn't trip on the sidewalk today like you usually do. Maybe you got up the

nerve to say hi to someone new. Or you offered a helping hand to a person, unbeknown to you, who desperately needed it.

Keep adding to your treasure chest

A treasure chest filled with uplifting words, thoughts and deeds. These types of treasures don't shine of gold or silver but instead of a remarkable inner radiance.

And remember, as rough as it is to be at the receiving end of gossip, this too shall pass. When it does, the character you've built along the way can be an excellent long-term investment.

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How can the world news become better tonight?

As the world becomes ever more interconnected, the pain of a person in Texas or Ukraine or across town can be seen in our own home with the simple touch of a screen. Day by day, we have access to the intimate struggles and heartaches of more people near and far. Of course, there are more joys to discover as well, but these can be hard to find, if not impossible, in the midst of the reporting of serious turmoil and anguish.

Children have a way of reminding us the current moment matters most. A child lives in the here and now with no concerns for paying rent or where and when the next meal is coming. They trust that when hungry they will be fed. They trust they will be protected and their needs will be met. And that's why when children are harmed, it takes the breath out of each of us in



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ways deeper than any words can express. For each adult has a responsibility in the broken trust of every child – whether that child lives in the Ukraine, Texas, down the block or in one's home. We created the world we share.

As I struggle with finding ways to help in a far-reaching world of turmoil, I turn to effective spiritual leaders of the past in learning how they came to understand and work through the serious struggles of their times. Buddha was one such spiritual leader. His life led him to meditation as a path in healing himself and the world he

lived in. Although he lived some 2,500 years ago, his insightful teachings are alive today and continue to be studied worldwide.

Breath awareness, *Anapanasati*, was what Buddha taught under the Bodhi Tree – the tree where he attained enlightenment. This tree still stands as a site of pilgrimage in Bodhi Gaya in the Indian state of Bihar. A tree which is even slightly alive after 2,500 years is something I certainly stand in awe of.

The following is an example of a simple meditative breathing technique. In times of stress, it's more important than ever to find effective ways to clear the mind of negativity. And to move forward with hope and resilience in healing the trust given to each one of us by every single child.

Counting Breath

Bring your attention to your breath. Hands closed into soft fists.

Inhale/exhale for 1, lift the thumb of one hand.

Inhale/exhale 2, lift the next finger up. Inhale/exhale 3, lift the next finger ... and so on until all 10 fingers/thumbs are raised.

After all 10 fingers/thumbs are raised, lower each one by one with every inhale/exhale:

Inhale/exhale lower one thumb, Inhale/exhale lower the next finger. Inhale/exhale lower the next finger ... and so on till all fingers and thumbs are closed back into the palms.

Sit quietly in contemplation.

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All is calm ... except for all those times when it's not

"What have you been doing lately," he asks.

"Teaching meditation." I respond.

"Oh," he says, "I just yell to get it all out of my system."

And I relate!

With the angst of COVID-19 times, political unrest, the busy struggles of family life and so many people going in different directions at different internet speeds, it's enough to cause a swami meditating on a mountain top to pause and scream, STOP!

It's clear to me when my meditation practice is strong and when it's not.

Here are some examples of what happens when a meditation practice is weak:

1. Your voice rises significantly and no one around you is hard of hearing.
2. You start acting like Tarzan.
3. You find yourself using words



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that would shame your grandma and please a drunken sailor.

4. You drink too much caffeine and start shaking at the weirdest times.

5. A driver on the road cuts you off and you follow him blasting the horn like a lunatic.

6. You abruptly hang the phone up mid-conversation on someone who irritates you.

7. More people irritate you every day. In fact, who doesn't?

What happens to you when you're under stress? Can you add more to this lucky list of seven?

I'm not saying these seven charms are all my personal experiences.

However, if any were, I wouldn't admit to them because grandma's reading this. The ways you respond to your stressors are probably quite different than the ways I respond to mine. It's all relative, depending, of course, on who your relatives are.

It's the way stress is handled that gives each of us a glimpse into our individual personal health or the meditative level we're at. For example, a trying situation could be handled quite admirably and other times handled in a way where a large rock is needed to crawl under afterward. A meditation practice is an effective way to navigate the stressors of life so fewer boulders are needed.

Basically, if you're calm in choppy waters, either you're clueless or something's definitely going right.

So in rocky times when things are not going right, here's a simple medi-

tation exercise to consider:

Slow the breath down.

Release negative judgments with a long exhale.

Think: I'm not that thought

I'm watching my breath.

Slow the inhale down.

Slow the exhale down.

Watch the breath.

With continual practice of momentarily bringing the focus to your breath when under stress, you may actually find the *Grrrrrrr*s transforming into *Abhhhhhs*.

If not this time, then next time.

And, one thing's for sure: there'll be a next time.

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The upside-down frown turns us all around on this mixed up planet

"Smile!" the photographer pleads. If you're feeling all right, it's easy. But if you aren't, well, it's probably still easy because that's what we do. "How are you?" she asks. "Good!" you reply when really you're not.

How is it possible to live an authentic life on this crazy, rotating, mixed up planet?

So you go home exhausted from all the effort of the day trying to be authentic in a world requiring otherwise. You take off your cap and your



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smile, sit down in front of YouTube and zone out.

Until you get up the next day, head off on your journey and someone asks, "How ya doing?"

"Good! And how are you?"

"Good!"

When neither of you are.

Could it be that responding honestly might cause you or the other person to linger a bit longer, ask a few more questions, discover a few more fascinating or not so fascinating things about each other?

Oh, come on, smile – just kidding. You don't have to smile, for Pete's sake! Or for Sally's sake. Or for Mitch McConnell's sake.

Mitch McConnell?

Because he never smiles and I'm sure for good reason.

Next time someone asks "How ya

doing?" – try telling them.

At least try.

Because as Sarah Ban Breathnach said so well, "The authentic self is the soul made visible."

Right on, Sarah!

And if you can say "Sarah Ban Breathnach" fast three times, you've successfully passed "go" and don't have to smile, but you probably will.

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What kind of joint do you live in? Referring to your spine, of course

So your lower back hurts? Could this be because you have a fear of money? Of course! Well, here's something to do about it. Repeat several times throughout the day:

"I trust the process of life. All I need is always taken care of. I am safe."

But maybe it's not the lower back. Could there be some other joint that's bothering you? Joints signify changes in direction, after all. So if it's some other joint that's bumming you out, simply repeat:

"I easily flow with change. My life is divinely guided and I am always going in the right direction."

Healing affirmations such as the ones above can be found in Louise L. Hay's fascinating book "Heal Your Body." It's a small but mighty dictionary of sorts. All you do is alphabetically look up your



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physical, emotional or psychological ailment (there are so many) and Hay has a concise, interesting take on a possible deeper source of the problem. She also has an affirmation to resolve it. Wow! From backaches to knee breaks, allergies to ovaries. 1, 2, 3 - *Blissphemy!* Problem solved.

Now, you may be thinking this is all hogwash. But the concept of affirmations as effective tools in healing is an ancient phenomenon. Instructions on how to create positive thought processes are general precepts throughout many ancient spiritual texts. For example, China's text of the "Tao Te Ching" of around 400 BCE, Chapter 56:

"Stop talking, meditate in silence,

blunt your sharpness, release your worries, harmonize your inner light ..."

If you're more of a science geek, well, there's something here for you, too. Popular scientific studies in neuro-linguistic programming of the 1970s and 1980s used affirmations to reprogram the mind into healthier ways of being. These scientific studies continue today in further affirming the power of affirmations. Social work and numerous forms of psychotherapies have long considered affirmations effective therapeutic tools in healing an assortment of personal traumas.

Now back to Hay's book. My neck happens to be hurting from an auto accident a few months ago. Chiropractic care, physical therapy, yoga and deep tissue massage all have been working wonders for my longer-than-expected healing journey, but let's look up Hay's take on this physical concern. Maybe she'll have the key to speed this process up a bit.

Aha! Here it is, "Neck Problems" - alphabetized between "Near Sightedness" and "Nephritis."

"Refusing to see other sides of the problem. Stubbornness, inflexibility."

Hmmm ... and I thought it was just the other car ramming into me. But, no, there's more. Here's my affirmation to work with:

"It is with flexibility and ease that I see all sides of an issue. There are endless ways of seeing things and doing things. I am safe."

I'm on it!

If only I had started this affirmation before the other car came out of nowhere.

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THE FIRST AMENDMENT

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

On a nice autumn day at the beach, I dream of peace

A nice summer day at the beach is hard to beat, except an autumn one. Here I am cuddled up in a warm blanket on the sand watching the sunset begin over the lake. The sound of the waves, vivid colors in the sky, cool crisp air to breathe.

Hurray for autumn!

"Buddha love sky" sitting cross-legged on the inviting sands of Lake Geneva - yep, that's me. I've finally made it to this glorious beach.

Beforehand, I picked up a book to read from the library just a few steps away.

A beautiful beach + a library next door = paradise.

It's not a long book. I'll finish it before the sun sets. Many powerful books get right to the point. I'm all set and ready for the "pow."

The book I picked consists of crayon drawings from the children of Sarajevo and the former Yugoslavia. Poetry is sprinkled around the colorful images. It was published by



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UNICEF in 1993. A time of war.

The colors become darker and darker as I move through the book.

The innocent crayon strokes are detailed in ugly ways of war no child should have to see. Within each jagged outline is a cry for help imploring the reader to honor the preciousness of childhood.

They live a war that makes no sense. They beg me, the reader, to consider them. Every drawing bleeds and pleads to take some action to stop the cruel war.

My senses sharpen to the warm soothing blanket around me. If only I could share this blanket with even one of these children. There's no war raging on this sandy beach. This blanket, this beach, surely would be a comfort.

But I'm a stranger with a blanket in another country, of a different language, a foreign lifestyle, a separate family of origin, thousands of miles away.

And 30 years between us from when these drawings and cries for help were made.

Yet there are children currently in Ukraine, Ethiopia, Yemen, Haiti, Palestine, Nigeria, Myanmar, Syria and oh so many more places on this earth facing similar unimaginable childhood horrors. This very minute. Right NOW.

Crayons can help get the word out. And I'll do what I can.

Thank you to UNICEF for putting this book together. Even though it's taken me 30 years to find it, it continues to speak volumes for our children today. Thank you to the Lake Geneva Public Library and the Lake Geneva Public Beach for giving me this opportunity to dream of peace.

And for waking me up to getting connected.

"I Dream of Peace" starts and ends

with drawings of what peace could look like. It's as beautiful as a Lake Geneva sunset. The children have such incredible imaginations. This is how I started reading on this sandy beach - in peace.

Now comes the courage to Walk it. Breathe it. Live it. Share it.

Create it.

It'll involve homework. I'm ready.

"Therefore, my friend, welcome to my place. We will share the sea and the beauty of a summer evening. We will enjoy the singing of the birds and do our homework together." - Nemanja, 11, from Sutomore

I dream of peace.

UNICEF continues today in its mission to help children around the globe.

More information for ways to help and become more involved are at Unicef.org.

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A first-class guy in the neighborhood I grew up in

"Goodness does not consist in greatness, but greatness in goodness."
-Athenaeus

His name was Jeff.

Just another kid in the neighborhood I grew up in. He was a big, lumbering guy who could've easily used his bulky size to intimidate, but rather he engaged others by paying attention. When you had a conversation with him, your words mattered. He asked questions and waited. He didn't hurry to fill in blanks. There wasn't a need to rush.

Tough characters peppered the block. The kind you'd walk by, lower your eyes and hope they didn't notice. Jeff never lowered his eyes. Instead his eyes met those who challenged him with crystal clear interest. And this interest permitted all of us lucky



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enough to be walking with him to walk in peace.

In school, he stood out in an atmosphere where competition thrived. One-upmanship was the name of the game, but popularity wasn't important to Jeff. Even though forging new personal paths in friendships, grades and all around life seemed to get more complicated with each semester, his stride seemed steady.

He was too interested in life to brood over it. Instead he rejoiced in the magnitude of it all.

"You can't be grateful and be unhappy," he'd say.

So he lived gratefully and particularly so for his mom. Every year on his birthday he gave his mom flowers to thank her for having him. A simple note attached, "Thanks, Mama."

It was rather comical the way he opened doors for girls who went by. Kids rolled their eyes as they passed him, but the truth is he opened doors for anyone that got to that door around the same time he did. Young, old, male, female, it didn't matter. He always let the other person go first. Kind, generous, loud, goofy, humble – a strange mixture of charm ready and willing to lend a hand.

Grades weren't his forte. Book learning didn't come easy for him. Yet no matter his grades, he was the kind of person you wanted to see succeed in life. And you knew he was rooting for you, too.

Perhaps you know someone like him?

As time went by, we lost touch with each other. Life got busy. People moved on, and on the excuses went. No really good excuses, either.

I hope the years since have been good to Jeff. He deserved a first-class flight in life. His neighborhood inspirations were more important to me than the grade I ended up getting in social studies. What grade was that? I don't remember.

But I do remember Jeff. I didn't realize then what a special friend he was. I do now.

It's been a long time coming. Thanks, Jeff.

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SERVING ST. CHARLES, GENEVA & BATAVIA

OPINIONS

THE FIRST AMENDMENT

▪ Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

And the beat goes on and on and on and on

It's the song you can't get out of your head.

Humming it here and there as it follows you around throughout the day. Is it the drumbeat? The bass notes? The lyrics? The enthusiasm? The marketing genius? Whatever it is, there it is again! Where did it come from?

Some melodies we hold onto longer than others.

One such song happened when I took my first yoga class in college. I was 18. My teacher wasn't much older. She was petite with long straight brown hair. Relaxed, comfortable, confident in her body; I was nervous, self-conscious, tall in mine.



YO JOAN!

Joan Budilovsky

I wanted to be like her. Try as I might, I never looked like her, but some of the melodies she shared have traveled with me to this very day. The easygoing kindness in her voice. The spark and enthusiasm for her subject.

I never dreamed I'd be teaching that same subject some 15 years later. But a deeper part of me must have known because the music had started playing.

I casually began doing yoga poses at home. I turned to reading yoga books in my spare time. I slowly became more and more interested in this subject I knew nothing about before that special teacher's class.

Whatever age you may be, can you think of a song you're still singing from years ago? What music are you carrying along with you this very moment?

Name that tune. Some music is poetically lyrical even when the chords are dissonant. Some music is fast, some slow, some high, some low and some downright magical. What tunes inspired you before money or

ego took center stage? There are so many musical aspects within each of our complicated yet magnificent lives.

As we enter into this holiday season, what songs are playing within you? Are they sharp? Are they flat? Are they jarring? Are they gentle?

As each of us continues to compose the intricate music of our lives, may the songs we create be rich in texture, nuance, dynamics and feeling.

Sincerely wishing you a deeply harmonious holiday season.

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