

The Value of a Sabbatical

As Yogis we seek to still the mind. But there is an eerie kind of quiet that comes about when you put your whole life on hold, lock the doors, and walk away on sabbatical. It is not the peaceful kind of stillness experienced in a hard-earned *savasana* or deep meditation. This is the cavernous emptiness of a mind that has been detached from its created identity and left to float untethered to any goal or activity.

For a little while this freedom is distracting to the ever-grasping mind—exhilarating even—but as soon as it comprehends what has actually happened, it starts to get just a wee bit...uncomfortable.

This past winter I closed the doors to my Yoga studio after eight years of daily classes and took a month off to travel, rest, and reevaluate the direction of my teaching and my life. It could have been a temporary door closing, but erratic economy notwithstanding, I chose to permanently let go of my studio space in order to experience the fullness of not knowing what would come next. Being a highly organized do-er (read type-A personality), it was all I could do not to compile a grand list of places to go and things to see while traveling. However, I forced myself to plan nothing and to accept the gracious offers of two friends to stay in their homes in Florida and Puerto Rico for several weeks. With my eleven-year-old son and several suitcases of home-schooling materials, I set off into the unknown.

The first few days were filled with the logistical busyness of getting to our destination, setting up a home base, helping my son create a routine for his studies, and getting groceries. Somewhere along the peanut butter aisle, it hit me that my life for the next month was not bound by the usual highly programmed, hourly scheduled, “don’t get in my way because I’ll be late for my next appointment and throw off the entire rest of the day’s plan—please!” No more rushing my son out the door to school, frantically organizing everything he and I both need for the day with one hand while gulping back three sips of morning brew with the other. I could actually sleep in and relax with a hot cup of coffee. This alone felt worth the price of admission AND I had no idea how to do it!

This eighteen-year practitioner of Yoga,



Photo courtesy of Jennie Lee

I had a knowing that all I was responsible for on a daily basis was showing up to what was in front of me to do, with a loving heart, a willing and humble mind, and a greater allegiance to my soul than to my ego.

nine-year *teacher* of Yoga was having a very hard time just *being*—with no agenda, no plan of action, no necessary next steps or goals. I realized the first thing I had to do was to teach myself how to relax and do nothing. Seems simple, right? Just sit and be... *right!*

Anyone who has tried to meditate for more than five minutes knows that the monkey mind becomes a psychotic screaming adolescent orangutan that is both hungry and irate on minute number six. The sheer panic that occurs in the mind when its source of identification and perceived value are ripped away is astounding. Suddenly, repacking suitcases and cleaning the refrigerator hold world-class urgency.

If “I” am not a teacher, if “I” am not needed by my community, if “I” am not serving a particular role or purpose, if “I” am not producing something creative—what value do “I” have? In fact who the heck am “I” anyway?

It was both a frightening and a humbling moment, as I unplugged from all the external connections and roles that fed my sense of purpose and belonging and realized that all the people in my life would in fact carry on perfectly well without me. But would “I” be okay without them? The Ego had suddenly been dethroned and it clearly wasn’t going to relinquish its crown without a fight.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, India’s beloved treatise on the science of Yoga, we are offered poetic wisdom for spiritual living in the world of wild egos. The Gita uses the war of Kurukshetra as an allegory for the battles of life, sharing through metaphor that life is one grand battle for control of humanity’s consciousness, a war between the noble soul and the tricky ego. Within each one of us, the question is posed: which will fight the hardest and get to run the show (i.e., win the battle)? Most of the time, we are so consumed

