

Yoga, Nonviolent Communication and Conflict

Last week, during yoga practice, I heard a dog going ballistic somewhere in the nearby neighborhood. Its voice was full of fury and I imagined it lunging at the end of its leash or hurling itself against the fence trying to mangle something or someone else just out of reach.

Two recent, local events have raised the same emotions in me – alarm and fear. Both events are linked to issues about racist attitudes and policies. The first involves the school board and community groups seeking policy changes, where the level of heat between the parties is escalated and increasingly personal. The second is ongoing antagonism between pro-Trump, anti-mask groups and other groups opposing the politics of Trump and prevalent racist policies. Since last summer, due COVID-19 tensions and the reaction to George Floyd’s murder by police, local protests continue to draw armed groups to rallies and protests in the city. Police are increasingly necessary to keep violence from escalating.

In order to rid ourselves of stress and tension, our seasoned yoga instructor directs our attention to two things. First is our breathing cycle, learning how to increase breathing capacity while using it to remove stress and tension from the body. Breathing techniques help to balance the nervous system, get out of “fight, flight, or freeze” mode. The second lesson: learning how to witness pairs of opposing muscle groups in each yoga pose. For example, just sitting cross legged with upper body erect, you can be at ease in your neck, shoulders, upper and lower back, while your abdomen fully supports the posture for many minutes without tension. Even in the toughest poses, you can train yourself to “feel the ease.”

Applying yoga principles to conflict, we can learn to be strong and courageous without being flooded with adrenalin and cortisol, the hormones of “fight, flight and freeze.” Noticing in our body when tension arises allows me to breath into the discomfort and release stress before it overtakes me. Likewise, noticing conflict as a pair of muscles opposing one another can be helpful. While one is under tension, we can learn to relax the opposing one.

In Nonviolent Communication (NVC), there is a corresponding principle. Like yoga, NVC trains us to notice our body and our breathing. Doing so helps to relax our thinking muscles while we trace the stimulus of our tension to its source, then name the feeling and need not being met. Noticing my nervousness about conflict, I can empathize with my need for ease and harmony, while also holding onto other important needs – to be heard, to be strong and to contribute, for example.

Planning to attend a “Please Mask Up” counter demonstration next weekend, I’m practicing yoga and NVC to prepare. I know that the raised voices and threats of violence will stimulate fear for my emotional peace of mind and physical safety. With breathing exercises and physical poses, I can be strong and yet calm. With NVC skills in hand, I can have empathy for my fear, while also choosing to meet needs for courage and support. If I can stay calm, I can also see my brothers and sisters who hold different viewpoints as humans too, only expressing their feelings and needs the best way they know how. Perhaps my acting peacefully will help them to do the same.

Likewise, with the conflict between school board members and others, I can advise those involved that while “being right” is often seen as the end itself, there lies beneath our strategy a need we’re trying to

meet. If we can agree on what those needs are, clearly and without judgment about the other, the chances of finding common strategies increases.

Finding peace is like getting comfortable in a yoga position. It takes discipline and practice, but it is healthy and your body benefits. Conflict is the same. The discipline of staying calm allows me to see you not as the enemy but as someone wanting many of the same things I want. The discipline of hearing and understanding your pain helps to establish mutual trust. Once trust is established, the distance to a mutually agreeable solution is much closer at hand.