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A Spiritual Practice born from Global Intercultural Experiences.

Every morning when I sit down on my meditation pillow or on my yoga mat, I am engaged in a spiritual practice which contributes significantly to my peace and well being. The incorporation of the yoga practice as a mainstay in my day-to-day life is one of many illustrations of how experiences traveling to another country and engaging with people from another culture have had a tangible, transformative impact upon my life.

Prior to going to India for the first time several years ago, I had experimented with yoga. The first time I remember doing yoga was with Nathalie who invited me to come along with her to one of her Saturday morning sessions. I found the class a bit challenging, but I was grateful to learn the basis for Nathalie's amazing posture. A decade or so later, while pregnant with my son Zachary, I found the gentle asanas on the video for pregnant women to be the best way to avoid morning sickness. Incidentally, those initial months of my pregnancy were the healthiest moments of my adult life. After Zachary was born, I tried with fits and starts to find my way back to the yoga mat, but nothing really took hold as a regular part of my day-to-day life.

While at Drake, I had the opportunity to work with Dr. Pramod Mahajan who was a professor of Pharmacy and of Indian origin. Pramod served on the Global International International Programs Action Council, a group of faculty leaders, who helped guide international work at Drake. As it happens, one day I forwarded out to these faculty leaders a call for proposals for funding to engage in partnership work. Pramod responded to my e-mail and shared with me that he was aware of a private medical institute in India which he thought might be an ideal partner. I was delighted to work with Pramod on exploring this partnership opportunity, becoming virtually acquainted with our new colleagues in India, negotiating a MOU, developing a grant project together, and planning a trip to India for the first time.

Meanwhile, Pramod and his lovely wife Prachi became dear friends. They had already come to my home when I had held international potlucks for the faculty and staff and each time they brought along with them an amazing vegetarian Indian dish. But now, they began also to invite me and my family to their home to introduce me to other aspects of their Indian culture and to their family. I remember celebrating with them Diwali, the festival of lights, and eating more amazing Indian cuisine. As our friendship and professional work on India advanced, I began to put together in my mind how interest in India had been long standing.

The seeds of curiosity about India had been planted thirty years prior with a course I took in college about India which featured prominently Mahatma Gandhi. The readings about Gandhi and his philosophy of non-violence made quite an impression upon my young adult mind and soul. To this day, I consider the course readings and discussions as the intellectual foundations of my belief that there exists and we must always seek alternatives to war in addressing a given conflict. In addition, at that time, there were two Indians in my life who also left an impression

upon me -- the Director of the International Programs and the student president of the International Students Association. The young student leader was so welcoming to US Americans joining the ISA and such an amazing student ambassador as he eagerly organized the international students to share about their cultures. I remember pondering how Ghandi's generation might have influenced his generation and whether he also followed Ghandi's teachings. To this day, I think of Dr. Bhatia as my first role model of what it means to be an Senior International Officer and my first introduction to a stately, sophisticated global intercultural person.

So, when I traveled to India with Pramod to visit our new partner, Pravara Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS), I carried with me some early adult impressions along with more current experiences engaging with our new Indian colleagues. Our professional experiences engaging with our new colleagues Vikor, Sanjeev and Soma as we became acquainted with PIMS and the Center for Social Medicine exposed me to an entirely different global experience than I had experienced prior to this point. PIMS is located in the state of Maharashtra about 5 hours inland from the city of Mumbai, in one of the most rural areas of the state. The PIMS campus is an oasis in an otherwise quite dry agricultural zone and their mission is focused on helping this rural area address all of their health care needs. Soma's Center for Social Medicine has rudimentary but effective satellite clinics throughout the region with professional staff and students resourcefully making a difference in the most remote of regions. I am in awe of their resourcefulness and dedication to serving the needs of these rural residences.

Following my guided experience with colleagues at PIMS, I ventured on my own to another kind of Health and Wellness Institute near the city of Lonavela. While PIMS does have an Ayurvedic campus as part of their system which we visited, their main Medical campus features primarily modern medicine. The second Institute to which I ventured in Lonavela was entirely focused on Yoga and Ayurvedic medical treatments. The Institute consisted of lodging and meal facilities, yoga studios, classrooms, a library, treatment facilities, research facilities, Ayurvedic gardens, a cow barn, administration, and a small shop.

While I did not partake of the full suite of services, there were other international patients and Indians from across northern India who had been diagnosed and prescribed a regiment of health and wellness services for the week. Every morning we would wake at the crack of dawn for our morning basic tea, followed by a yoga session and then a vegetarian breakfast. Those having the full treatments for the week would then go get their prescribed treatments for their various purification needs or ailments. Then lunch would be available, followed by additional treatments. Late afternoon there would be another yoga session followed by breathing or chanting sessions. After dinner, there would be lectures held about living the principles of yoga throughout their life.

Each time we were waiting for a session to begin or sitting down for a meal, I had an opportunity to engage with those who had traveled far and wide to be at this center and to learn about what called them to these practices. Among the Europeans present was a nurse who had traveled

once before and found the combination of yoga and the purification treatments had made a significant impact upon her digestion system. So she was back for more and was committed to help others learn about these practices. Among the Indians present were educators from across Northern India who were present to experience and learn as much about yoga as a holistic practice so that they could incorporate it into their schools back home. Each of them had a story to share with me about their states of origin and had plenty of questions for me about the U.S.

But the individual in Lonavala who had the most impact upon me was the amazingly beautiful young yoga instructor who came into the class with flowing white gowns and moved with the grace of a dove. Her morning and late afternoon yoga sessions were amazing experiences in becoming more acquainted with what one's body could do and how to be reverential in the process of doing these asanas. Each session built upon the one before and as the days passed, I found my body opening up to and accepting the grace of her instruction. My last day at the center, I had trouble finding the words to express my gratitude to her for all that she had helped me to discover about myself and the peace and grace possible in this world. This experience doing yoga with her within the broader atmosphere created at this Yoga center brought into my life the practice of yoga in a holistic, deep and meaningful way.

So, I can say unequivocally, that I have been changed by my intercultural experiences learning about India, engaging with Indians and traveling to India. I have been intellectually challenged by the works of Gandhi, emotionally enriched by friendships with Indian friends, experientially stretched by experiences at PIMS and spiritually uplifted by my experiences at the Health and Wellness. I have been so blessed through these experiences to be able to layer mind, heart, and soul another dimension of what it means for me to be a global intercultural person.

So, now each day when I settle down onto my yoga mat to engage in this spiritual practice, I am striving to align my heart - mind- body, to connect with what is most meaningful in this life, and to renew my commitment to being the best person I can be on this day. But, I am also in a small way honoring the gifts offered to me through these intercultural experiences.