



# Largely Graceful, Bodies of Substance

By Tish Parmeley

“Soften your mouth.”

I always smile when Sally says this. I know she’s talking to me. She has guided the class into Tree Pose (*Vrksasana*). I have been concentrating on using the muscles in the front of my thigh to prevent my knee from locking, lifting my chest, making sure not to arch my back. I haven’t noticed that my teeth have been buried in my contorted lips. I don’t know if smiling is softer but it has to be better than what I’ve been doing.

Sally’s class is designed for women and men of size. In the Bay Area fat community she is known for creating a space in which people can learn to do yoga postures in a manner that suits their bodies. She says that working specifically with large women and men is not something she ever thought about doing as a teacher. “It just wasn’t in my consciousness. The work came to me,” she explains.

One of Sally’s students, a large woman, approached her and said, “Would you be interested in teaching a yoga class specifically for large women?”

Sally got very excited and responded, “Yes!”

They organized the first class entirely through email. There was an enthusiastic response. That was over three years ago,

and there are now four classes a week. Two of them are just for women and two of them are for women and men.

Ari-Asha Castalia is one of Sally’s students. She says she was suspicious before attending her first class. She was sure she wouldn’t be able to do the poses and she imagined a teacher who would judge her. She says, “I just knew the teacher would have a yoga standard none of us with fat bodies could meet, demonstrating the poses perfectly.”

Her experience of Sally countered that fear. “I liked the stretching, the peacefulness and the way she kept saying, ‘This is a fine place to stay. If you want a further challenge you can...,’ meaning I was OK where I was. What I was doing was recognized as already challenging.”

In class, Sally guides the group into a yoga posture, prompting the breath and the reach of limbs. She may go to an individual class member and adjust the arc of an arm or touch the tension in a shoulder. She notices the tendency to lock a knee and reminds the person to breathe.

Fat people sometimes feel unseen. Sally’s attention to detail and personable manner create an atmosphere of dignity. She will often comment on how beautiful the class looks.

Miriam Cantor began taking a class with Sally to work with her injured knee after months of doing traditional physical therapy. As a Rosen Method practitioner, Miriam appreciates the language Sally uses to talk about the body. “Finding people I really trust to help me move in my fat body is so very rare. Sally’s class has been the only thing that has successfully helped me feel there is hope for my injured knee, after two and a half years, which feels absolutely miraculous,” says Miriam.

Marilyn Wann is a fat activist. She has written a book *Fat!So?* (Ten Speed Press) and she was instrumental in getting the Human Rights Commission of the City and County of San Francisco to add height and weight to the list of attributes protected from discrimination. She takes yoga classes with Sally.

Marilyn says, “I’m always eager to enjoy physical activity in a fat-positive, body-loving setting. After the very first session, I found myself feeling sure-footed, planted on the ground. It’s a delicious sensation that I continue to enjoy during the week after my Saturday yoga class. Even after my first try at yoga, it seemed so much easier simply to stand. I had far fewer twinges of lower back pain or soreness. My legs felt bouncy, also at ease and not as likely to lock at the knee.”

We are living in a maelstrom of fat phobia. Fat has been declared an epidemic and the list of illnesses associated with weight is long. Many of those health issues are mediated by yoga. Yoga practice has been credited with helping people to have healthy blood pressure, cardio vascular efficiency and the ability to maintain healthy levels of cholesterol and blood sugar.

Flexibility improves. Mobility increases. And maybe more importantly, yoga can foster a connection between the spirit, mind and body. For fat people, who may have been in a life-long struggle with their bodies, yoga can be a way to reconnect.

This isn’t my first experience with yoga. In the early seventies I watched Liliias Folan on PBS and followed along with her daily repetitions of salutation to the sun. I was fat then and much too afraid to attend a class. Alone in



my apartment, I was safe from judgmental eyes. For many fat people, attending a class in which they are the only person of size can be a challenge. There may be a tendency to try and do poses that you really aren’t able to do, or to do nothing when the pose seems too challenging. I may have been safe from those experiences but I had no one to guide or encourage me.

Sally teaches yoga in a manner that allows for possibility and yet acknowledges the significance of every attempt. She will adapt a pose, find a way to use chairs, pillows and yoga straps; even the wall becomes a support for a person trying to find balance. She does not focus on an idea of the right way to do the pose. Instead she focuses on how the pose feels to the individual.

Sally says, “I love working with my students. As a teacher I have the opportunity to witness the profound impact that practicing yoga has on their lives. Those of us in average size bodies can only imagine what it is like to live in a large size body in a culture that hates and ridicules fat. It must take tremendous courage just to walk out your front door every day. In my yoga classes I see courageous women committed to being who they are in the face of cruel discrimination. I see them receive the blessings of yoga to support their healing and empowerment. I am inspired by their courage and have deep appreciation for their journeys. It is truly my privilege to work with them.”

My favorite pose is Warrior II Pose (*Virabhadrasana II*). I like the fluid movement we go through to arrive in the pose. We begin in Mountain Pose (*Tadasana*), standing with awareness. We raise our arms and turn, moving one knee forward and being mindful not to move past the foot. Feel the back leg strengthening in the pose. We extend our arms our palms down. Focus your intentions. We turn our palms up. Feel yourself open to possibility. I feel strong, present and ready.

Sometimes I look around the room at my fellow yoga practitioners, all of them people of size and I see how strong and balanced we all look. Open the pages of a book or magazine on





yoga and you see sinewy bodies in seemingly perfect balance. If you walk into one of the yoga for large men and women classes taught by Sally Pugh, you see bodies of substance in postures of grace.

Doing class with Sally gives us courage. Ari-Asha says, “I can’t imagine my life without yoga. My practice has changed me in profoundly deep ways that I find hard to articulate but know are true. I have added a third weekly class that is a ‘main-stream’ class with men and women of all sizes. Now I know that being able to bend forward at one’s hips is not something that thin people inherently know and are able to do by virtue of their thinness. I have had the experience of wanting to do a specific pose for a long time, and incrementally moving toward it, without exasperation, without negative self-talk, believing that I could, until one day I was able to do it! I am regularly inhabiting my own skin now—and finding it ‘a fine place to stay.’”

I continue my practice between classes, home alone. But I hear Sally’s voice as I move. And once a week I join my community of fellow fat yogis and yoginis and the teacher who sees our bodies and knows our individual tendencies. It’s nice to have someone remind me to soften my mouth.

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