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BALANCING ACT

By Priscilla Long

On March 17, 2003, the day I turned 60, the call came. My mother had taken a turn for the worse. Her dying preoccupied the next weeks, and after her death on May 29, 2003, I thought of her every day. These events — my mother's life and death — superseded my big birthday. It wasn't until the following year, when I turned 61, that it hit me. Sixty-one — far from 70, true, but not *too* far! I am a poet. I am a writer. And no, I did not begin saving at age 20 and no, I do not have enough savings and no, my social security is not adequate and no, my mortgage is not paid off, and no, I will not be able to retire, whatever that is, at age 65. No way. This brings us to the subject of yoga.

I always had the idea that when I turned 70, I would start taking yoga. Life would afford me that. No time to go into decline. Time to grow, to change, to stretch, to keep learning, to keep creating, to walk into new worlds, to stand on one's head. Time enough and space enough, for I would (somehow) be retired. Retired, not from creative work, but from the stress and pressure of working many more than 40 hours a week editing and teaching and coaching to finance the basic necessities, to live in a simple but decent manner. After a lifetime of hard work we are supposed to get a rest.

Aren't we?

I am a self-employed person who lives by herself in a house she owns in an expensive metropolitan area (Seattle). In U.S. Census terms I am one of 25 million Americans who live alone. I am one of 193,000 Americans employed as "Writers and Authors." I'm healthy. I'm happy. I'm a productive writer. I do the work I love, and I love the work I do. I am health-insured, unlike 60 million other Americans (in 2003). And this is the rub. My health insurance costs twice as much as my shelter, and keeps me from saving much.

So here I am. My dear country with its most expensive and least effective health-care system in the industrialized world and my dear younger self with her financial ineptitude have collaborated to provide me with a working older age, with what could be a working *old* age. This

being the case, as the Buddhists say, how shall I proceed? My mother's death was painful and sad and it was like crossing a turbulent river. Now I am on the other side.

I am making financial decisions, deciding directions for my creative work, redecorating my living room. I have decided to retire immediately. I will keep on earning my keep, of course. But I will do everything I ever wanted to do, right now. I will work more efficiently, increase the daily time of work on my own writing, see a film every week. I will take yoga.

I sign up for the Friday evening class at Seattle Yoga Arts, on 15th Street on Capitol Hill. I go to my first class.

The studio is a space of candlelight and dim incandescent light, silence, an expanse of polished maplewood floor. Sticky yoga mats, blue and green, are stacked in one corner. The walls and baseboards are painted raw sienna and burnt sienna — earthcolors of gourds and nuts, seedpods, pinecones. Two or three students sit in the Lotus position, meditating. To the left of the door is an entry area with a worn carpet, benches, a coat rack, a water cooler with a half-full cistern, a small bookcase stuffed with books and papers. At the center of the far wall, in an alcove, candles flicker among statues — are they Krishnas? Shivas? Kuan Yins? Bodhisattvas? This is the altar wall. The ceiling is softened with lengths of pale orange linen. Harnessed into blue straps hooked to the ceiling, a man hangs upside down.

Our teacher, Lisa Holtby, greets me, asks if I have any injuries. She wears a black leotard and tights and a thick cardigan sweater. She has straw-colored bangs cut straight across and ruddy, highboned cheeks. She looks more like an advertisement for Kansas or for Dutch Boy Paints than a yoga teacher. I tell her about my knee. Later, she stands before the class in bare feet and black leotard. Her palms press together in front of “the heart.” She leads the class in a blessing (you can participate if you feel comfortable) and in the Om (if you feel comfortable). Then we begin the series of asanas (yoga postures) known as the sun salute. Lisa's movements are slow, solid, smooth, muscular, square rather than light or quick. Her voice soothes and nudges the class into pretzel twists, bends, balances. In the middle of the class someone's cellphone breaks into an aria. “How surreal!” Lisa says. “It's not my fillings, I swear!”

The weeks go by. Between doing my writing, and teaching my writing classes, I faithfully attend my yoga class. I am terrible at standing on one foot. Twenty yogis stand in the tree pose (one foot on the ground, the other curled up into the groin, arms stretched to the ceiling). I fall first to one side, then to the other side. (Does this mean, I wonder, that my life is

out of balance?) Lisa kindly gives me hints but she calls no special attention to my plight. My falls make loud thumps as if one person in the room is practicing leaps instead of standing like a lone pine tree. I lose my footing, lose my footing again...

Outside of class I teach writing, and in class I watch Lisa teach yoga. She is a master teacher. To teach is to create a space, to create and hold open a container for learning, growth, and development. It is a space created by kindly encouragement, prods, attention to the class as a whole, attention to each individual in the class. It is a space created by personal authority, knowledge, focus, clarity. To teach well is to speak clearly. To see what is needed and to address that. I like the word *guide* as well as *teacher*. Good teachers, good *guides*, try from time to time to put themselves into the hands of other good teachers, partly to rest and grow in a context provided by someone else, partly to observe skilled teaching.

Like writing, yoga is a process you enter in to. You commit to the process. Just talking about it has no effect. Just wanting to be a writer is like just wanting to practice yoga. Nobody says, "I only wish I could practice yoga." People who want to practice yoga practice yoga. But how often do we hear, "I want to write." "I have this idea that I could write." "I dream of being a writer."

I dream of standing on one foot.

The practice of yoga has a lot in common with the practice of writing. Especially does the practice of yoga have a lot in common with the practice of writing poetry. Both yoga and poetry have emerged from extremely ancient traditions. Both have numerous branches and permutations. Both are breath-based. Both require the practitioner to bring attention to the present, to the matter at hand. Both benefit from a calm, self-compassionate, benevolent attitude. Both can be highly challenging. Both call for years of practice. I am a long way from knowing whether anything about yoga is as thrilling as realizing a new poem.

But I like yoga. I like walking into a world unknown to me, a world that has existed forever alongside my world like a fourth dimension. I like the muted colors, and the quiet of the studio. I like the spirituality of it — a tolerant spirituality. I like the way Lisa guides us at the start of the practice to think about clarity or to think about compassion for ourselves. I like the calmness of the yoga studio.

For to walk into the yoga studio is to walk into a cave of calm concentration. The silence is a calm silence. The yogis are taking off their street shoes, getting their sticky mats and laying

them out. They sit on their mats, breathing to calm themselves, or stretching, bending, twisting. The movements are fluid, the voices low. The sense of calm is vast, like a physical thing, like ocean waves slow-lapping the shore or the rustle of leaves in a grove of birch trees. Candlelight flickers at the altar wall. Dim lighting softens the edges of the room, mutes angles, quiets the polished maplewood floor. Calmness is dusky light, hushed voices, those warm earth colors. The lack of clutter is calming. Lisa is calming in her very presence, her leotard, her tights, her bare feet, her plain fingers and plain cardigan and unpretentious smile.

During the ten years before her death my mother could move less and less. Strokes and diabetes felled her. She could not walk. She could not feed herself, or turn over by herself. She, the genius of the family, the brilliant psychologist, could no longer speak well. She wore diapers and she curled in a wheelchair. My father was her caretaker. I am looking at a photograph of her on the Heron Point dock on the Chester River, the river that flowed past my childhood. Here is my mother in her wheelchair surrounded by her smiling family. She is not smiling. Her face is an image of pure suffering.

In her last weeks, when she could barely swallow, when she could barely speak, when none of the nurses could understand her whispered words, when we stayed at her bedside at all hours, when we tried to calm her terrible anxiety, when we moved her every ten minutes, when we fed her ice cream and called the nurses whenever we needed to, my mother's words were simple, monosyllabic, continuous: "Help me. Help me."

I'm terrified of strokes. I'm terrified of not being able to turn over.

I'm terrified of legs bent stiff, toes curled into soles, fingernails cutting palms. I wake at night. I move my arms. My legs. My fingers. I spread my toes. I turn over just to make sure I can. I turn over again. In my yoga class I twist and bend. I try to stand on my head. I try to stand on one foot. Wherever my mother is, I'm sure she's not with me in my yoga class. My mother would not be caught dead in a yoga class. But I am here. Breathing. Falling, and falling again. My mother is gone. But she's here in my genes. She's here in my thoughts. She's probably past all surprise when it comes to me. She probably wouldn't be surprised even to see me twisting like a pretzel or standing on my head or hanging upside down or balancing on one leg, my arms branching up as if to embrace the universe.