

The Pleasures of Not Doing Yoga by Karen Hirsch

For the last year or so, I have been practicing a kind of non-yoga. Yoga without the poses. Yoga in my mind.

It started when I began serving as a teaching assistant in one of Denise's classes. As a TA, I had the opportunity to sit still and watch an entire yoga class. When I observed a class from the sideline, I was stunned by how beautiful I found every person in the class. It didn't matter if someone was a very advanced student or a beginner, young or old. The details of how someone did the pose were irrelevant. Observing the effort and the expression of self were what I found captivating.

Last winter, I learned I was pregnant with my second. I felt awful from day one. The yuckiness of the first weeks went on and on. The pregnancy turned into what felt like one long first trimester. While I wanted to do yoga, I just couldn't. The mere thought of bending forward made me more queasy. I had just moved into a Level III class. I was proud of myself for that. But I had to let it go.

I took a break and focused on being a TA. By the end of the pregnancy — when I was probably as wide around as I am tall — I could not comfortably get around the room to offer suggestions or adjustments. So, as I did in the first weeks of my apprenticeship with Denise, I watched. I soaked up yoga with my eyes and my ears and kept the rest of my body out of it.

A few weeks after our son was born, I found myself joyfully returning to yoga. What did I do? I did outward and inward spirals with my legs in the shower a couple of times. That was it. That was the beginning. But it felt amazing. Not because my body felt great (it didn't) or that the pose felt great (it is, after all, a pretty subtle motion). It was the act of returning that felt so wonderful. "I'm back," I said to my body and myself. I get to go back to the beginning again.

It is so natural, with all things in life, to want to advance and improve. Who is really comfortable being a beginner? It makes us uncomfortable. But there is something unique about beginnerhood when it comes to yoga. Returning to my yoga practice after a long absence, I will face many of the challenges I had when I started. My hamstrings will be tight — again. My wrists will be weak — again. But it will be an incredible homecoming. Not unlike hearing a favorite song again for the first time or taking the first steps along a cherished hike.

That is why, at nearly 40, I can picture myself at 80 on the mat, or in my wheelchair, doing whatever yoga I can. What our asanas look like, comparing ourselves to anyone else in the room, is utterly irrelevant. The journey — getting to do the yoga, any yoga — is the reward.