

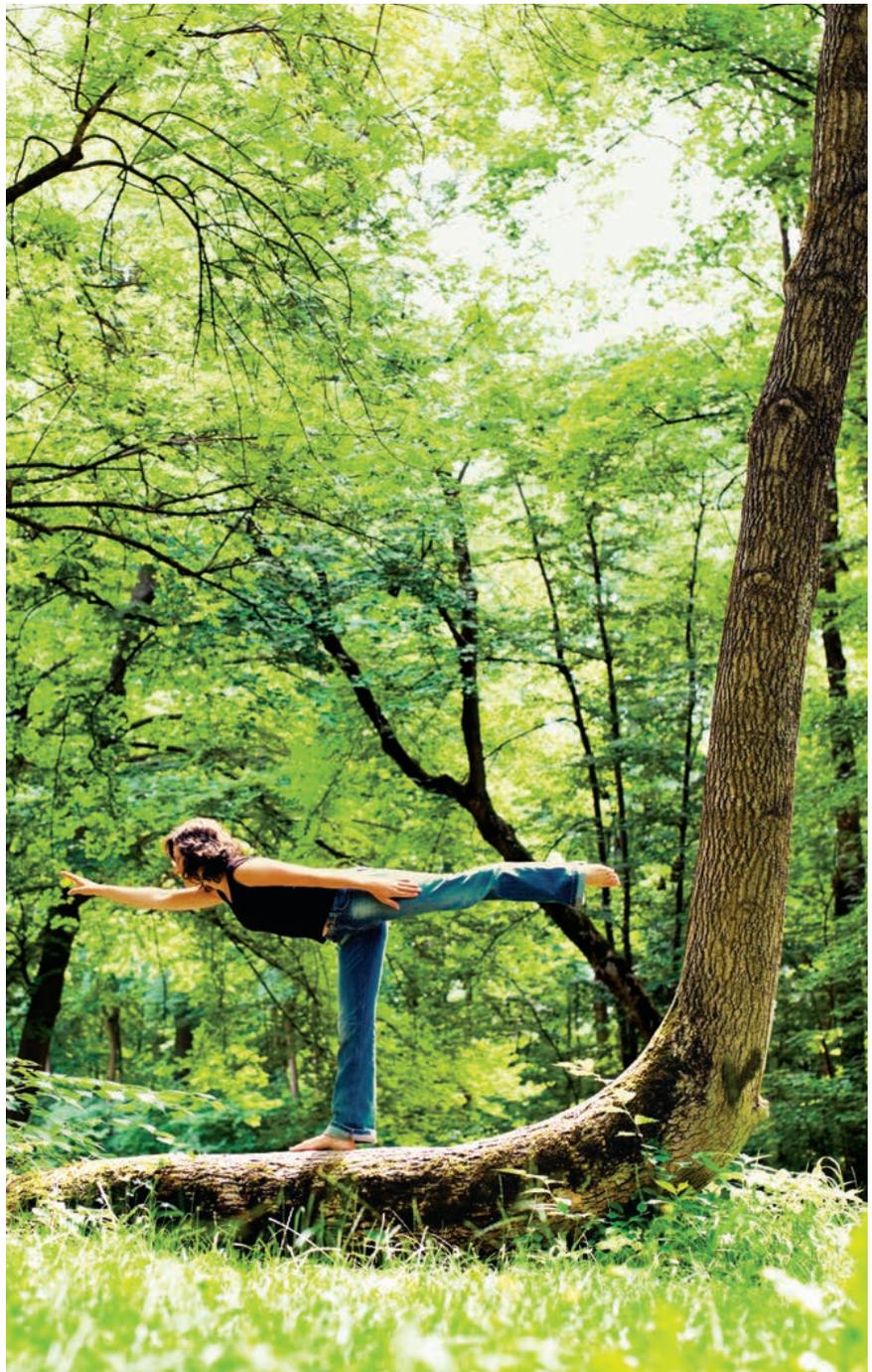
self adjust | Revisiting your expectations can be the key to finding inner balance.

I'M NOT A ZEN PERSON BY NATURE. But things got even less zen in my life when, about a year ago, I lost my publishing job in New York City, a victim of a still-shaky economy. Panicked about money, I quit my fancy \$1,000-a-year gym with its too-challenging yoga classes (though if there was ever a time I needed yoga, this was it). I also sublet my expensive Manhattan apartment and decided to move to the country, where my husband of two years owned a little house in a New England farming community, near his business.

We'd spent the first part of our courtship, then marriage, commuting back and forth, alternating city and country weekends, living separately in-between. I missed my spouse when we were apart, but enjoyed my city routine—my interesting friends, the museums and restaurants, the ability to walk everywhere and shop on a whim. Now, it seemed smarter to lead a quieter, less expensive existence, at least for a while.

But though I was resolved to make the transition work, I worried that I wouldn't be suited to rural life. I'd worked amidst skyscrapers for so long, barreling my way ahead on crowded sidewalks like a true Manhattan native, drinking in the energy, reveling in the frenetic pace, availing myself of all the options, including yoga classes that matched the city's intensity. Even at my gym's "gentle" level-1 class, there was no sauntering in five minutes beforehand to nab a spot near the teacher. Instead, a line of women snaked out the door, mats in hand, ready to sprint for a prime position.

Here, I was different than my city peers. Though outwardly intense, inside I didn't feel so fierce. I wasn't after a prime spot. For one thing, I'm a certified klutz. I'd spent a good part of my childhood tripping



“Dare to be! Dare to step fully into what life is asking of you.”

- Richard Miller, PhD
Founder of IRI

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reflection

down steps and falling into holes, never quite managing to figure out exactly where I was in relation to the world around me. I was new to yoga, and wanted to blend in, lose myself in the back, merely hoping for enough space to move my arms and legs

without thwacking anyone. I also yearned for a workout that would leave me calmer and that might even help me feel OK about my strong but slightly chubby body. Yoga, I hoped, would restore the imbalance between internal and external, so I could stand a little steadier in the world.

As I sneaked peeks at my fellow New York yogis, vainly trying to imitate their perfect form, I prayed the teachers wouldn't call me out. And while everyone chanted at the end of class, I wondered if my Oms sounded as half-hearted as they felt to me. I'd often leave class feeling shaky, self-confidence-wise.

It's not yogic to compare, but I was accustomed to competing in school, then at work, and I couldn't seem to help myself. And so I took to my mat solo, trying random beginner DVDs in the privacy of my living room. I discovered that even someone with no native talent could eventually catch on. But yoga's purported emotional benefits remained elusive. Rather than luxuriate in Savasana (Corpse Pose) after my workouts, I often skipped right past it, eager to get on with my day. I may have been burning calories, but I wasn't exactly finding the calm I craved.

The country, on the other hand, was a little too calm, my days pared down to writing at my desk, the cat winding lazily around my feet, no colleagues to distract me, no city crowds to navigate at lunch. My social interactions were reduced to greeting the few-and-far-between fellow walkers and joggers I saw during my own long walks that wended past old tractors and crumbling stone fences. "Will I ever get used to this?" I wondered, feeling a stab of nostalgia for my old life, sometimes looking longingly after neighbors as they continued on their way with purpose.



Paula Derrrow found her fit at a welcoming yoga class.

COURTESY OF PAULA DERRROW

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balanced body

reflection

Then, one afternoon, a statuesque brunette with a sleek bob and a cute outfit stopped me on my walk and, after a friendly chat, invited me to a local yoga class. "It's on Monday nights on the property of a local summer camp," she informed me. "It costs \$5."

"Sure," I said, though my expectations were low. In New York City, you can barely get a decent cup of coffee for \$5, never mind attend a fitness class. But a few days later, I donned a pair of yoga pants and a scruffy T-shirt and hitched a ride with my new acquaintance, a \$5 bill scrunched in my fist. We arrived in a clearing adjacent to a glassy lake with a rickety lifeguard chair and outdoor showers labeled "Boys" and "Girls." My friend led me up a ramp to a simple wooden building; inside, various people were pushing picnic tables against the wall to clear space on the none-too-clean floor. As I dropped my bill in a shoebox, a petite, gray-haired lady in Texas and socks hugged my friend, then held her hand out to me. "I'm Sue—I teach the class," she said. I smiled, then couldn't help taking her measure, sizing her up like I did the 9 or 10 other women of all shapes and ages in the room, some in yoga pants toting their own mats, others sporting gym shorts and sandals, like Sue.

"I'm not the chubbiest or the oldest," I thought, automatically shifting into comparing mode. Then I picked a mat from the pile and took my place on the floor, not in the front or back but somewhere in the middle. As I followed Sue's voice, inhaling and reaching, I noticed the sound of spring peepers and crickets outside the windows, tiny chirps that shored me up, giving me courage. Maybe I could actually let myself enjoy this.

We started out moving slowly, the air warm and muggy, not because we were doing hot yoga to increase the intensity of our workout but because there was no air conditioning. Sue read poses from a stack of index cards, apparently not afraid to show that she wasn't exactly sure what was coming next. As I slipped into Downward Dog, then Plank, then rounded my back into Cat Pose and stretched up again, repeating the familiar series I knew

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reflection

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from my home sessions, I saw one or two students take Child's Pose, or simply rest on the floor, legs akimbo. "That's right—relax if you need to," Sue encouraged as the moves grew more challenging—a Camel Pose here, a balancing pose there.

"Wow, this is a real yoga class," I thought, my city snobbery dissolving; for a minute, I folded into Child's Pose myself, enjoying the stillness, the rare feeling of being part of a group, no better or worse than anyone else. As I pressed my forehead gently down, my heart pounding in my ears from my efforts, I heard an owl hoot in the distance. Then I straightened up and joined in again.

When the time finally came for chanting and resting in Savasana, I was feeling ready, warm with perspiration, muscles limber. Instead of rushing off to the next appointment, I found myself settling onto my mat. And with my chest rising and falling in time to Sue's suggestion to "picture a place where you're happy," I let myself drift.

I felt relaxed. Energized. Maybe even exorcised of the internal demons that had prodded me to compare, whispering that I wasn't good enough, graceful enough, spiritual enough, thin enough to do yoga. These women, this teacher, felt welcoming, or maybe I was finally welcoming myself. It felt OK to do whatever it was I was capable of, precarious balance be damned, and to let myself belong.

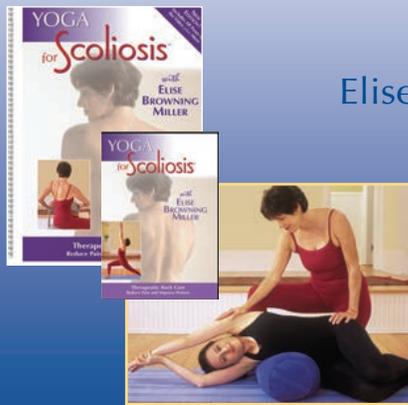
"So, how'd you like it?" my friend asked afterward, and then pulled me over to introduce me to a fellow student. "Paula's new here in town," she told her. "She lives on my street." After meeting a few others (apparently, no one felt the urge to rush off immediately), I followed my new yoga friend into the dark, calling out a few goodbyes, the cool night air chilling my damp skin. As she dropped me off at my door, she asked, "Yoga next Monday?" and I didn't hesitate before I said yes. ❖

Writer and editor Paula Derrow divides her time (and yoga practice) between New York City and Connecticut.

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