

EDITOR:
RANI SHEEN

MIND, BODY, SPIRIT

Cultish fitness communities, meditation workouts and muscle mantras: Is the gym becoming a spiritual stand-in? By EMILIE DINGFELD

AROUND THE WHITE, LIGHT-FILLED STUDIO, flashes of lime green, fuchsia and black Lycra blur as a roomful of people sway together, balance one another overhead, roll around or gently connect palm to palm. We're at 80 Gladstone—a movement studio in Toronto opened by yoga teacher Diane Bruni—and this is Contact Improv, which involves moving spontaneously for an hour and a half while maintaining a point of contact with a partner. You sweat and gain strength from bracing your core and supporting your weight so you can lift your partner off the ground, if the urge strikes you, but you're also forced to be present and mindful,

as the movement is always changing. "It's a wonderful metaphor for life," says Bruni, who also offers classes taught by a Shaolin monk. "His spiritual practice is qi gong and tai chi and kung fu. It's not praying and it's not sitting; it's all in movement."

The search for spiritual stand-ins is on. "The yoga studio is a modern-day church, in a way. It's where people go to be with their community," says Jeff Krasno, co-founder of Wanderlust, a festival of meditation, yoga, movement and more that takes place in 14 cities worldwide—including Whistler (July 31 to Aug. 4) and Mont-Tremblant (Aug. 21 to Aug. 24)—and »

expects about 120,000 participants this year. “It’s about being around people who share your values and beliefs. [It’s] not religion in the more theocratic sense, but there’s an ethos to live mindfully.” In 2012, Krasno spoke at the Gospel of Sweat, held at New York’s Riverside Church and spearheaded by Lululemon, a company known for extolling the virtues of self-empowerment and inner development to its staff. Yogis and fitness aficionados gathered to sermonize about how a growing wellness-focused contingent is “praying through their pores.”

People have long looked to religion to work through life’s ebbs and flows, cope with stress and foster a sense of peace. Since the ‘80s, however, fewer of them report visiting places of worship, and a quarter of Canadians don’t identify with a religious affiliation. “Many people might describe themselves now as more spiritual than religious, because they see religion as primarily involving church,” says Harold Koenig, a psychiatrist and professor at Duke University. “They’re kind of searching for religion without the costs of religion that involve changing your life [or] obeying the doctrines.” The term “spirituality” has become a buzzword that is often interpreted as looking inward and being mindful, though the connotations are endless. Best-selling books from self-help gurus like Spirit Junkie Gabrielle Bernstein and Oprah’s BFF Deepak Chopra populate nightstands, and fitness—or “wellness”—classes with life-directional promises are gaining momentum.

If the strongest predictor of health is attendance at religious services, as Koenig suggests, SoulCycle’s members must be batting above average. At the cultish spin studio with 26 locations in the U.S., disciples pay up to \$70 per class to reserve a bike before the general public can, because it “doesn’t just change bodies. It changes lives.” Then there’s IntenSati, where mantras of life transformation (“Yes, I want it, I really, really want it”) are chanted while you raise your heart rate through interval training, dance, yoga and martial arts, at gyms across the States and via download.

“It is so spiritually refreshing to have that 60 or 90 minutes per day when you are just aligning with your body...and cultivating something beyond six-pack abs,” says Krasno, who zones out regularly on a stationary bike. “[You’re] cultivating clarity of mind.”

We’re just beginning to embrace the health benefits of meditation, despite the fact that it’s at least 5,000 years old—this year *Time* named an issue “The Mindful Revolution.” Whether you like your mantras straight up or mixed into your workouts, physical and psychological benefits can be reaped from clocking some “om”s—a 2014 review in *JAMA Internal Medicine* found that 30 minutes of daily meditation improved anxiety and depressive symptoms similarly to taking antidepressants.

All kinds of mind-body workouts are cropping up in gyms across North America; as many as 70 per cent of them offer fusion classes, according to a 2013 survey by the IDEA Health and Fitness Association. You’ll find Buddhas alongside medicine balls at Spirit Loft in Toronto, where former CFL player Andre Talbot and his partner, Catalina Moraga, teach classes that draw from yoga as well as strength training. “We’re not taking enough time to be still and quiet and to look more honestly

“IT IS SO SPIRITUALLY REFRESHING TO HAVE THAT 60 OR 90 MINUTES PER DAY WHEN YOU ARE JUST ALIGNING WITH YOUR BODY...AND CULTIVATING SOMETHING BEYOND SIX-PACK ABS.”

at how we are living our lives and relating to people,” he says. For the Kettlebell Zen class, iron balls dot the yoga mat-strewn floor. Before picking them up, Talbot guides the 15 students (about two-thirds women) through breathing exercises. “We’re strengthening the diaphragm—crucial for spine health, core strength and stability, and for releasing that tendency to contract around the breath,” he says. “We’re opening up space right now.” Kettlebell swings, deadlifts and presses are timed with deep inhalations and exhalations that sound like staccato hisses.

Short on zen but long on zeal, impassioned grunts and slamming barbells are the sounds of CrossFit, whose evangelical following preaches the gospel of WODs (workouts of the day), a Paleo diet and friendly competition. It’s the strong sense of community—which accounts for 15 per cent of religion’s health benefits, according to Koenig—that keeps people deeply involved. “You have this thing you can bond over,” says Chris Harrison, owner of CrossFit Lions in North Vancouver. Believers have an iron grip

on the tenets of the movement, which include a commitment to well-being that’s not dissimilar to that of the devout. (“Religious people tend to live healthier. They’re less likely to use drugs, to excessively drink,” says Koenig.) To Harrison, the idea of CrossFit standing in for religion is a stretch, “but I think people will find themselves and find their capacity to overcome obstacles.”

Back at 80 Gladstone, the room’s lighting is now dimmed and half of the dancers are in corpse pose, being massaged by their partners’ feet. One regular participant, Dionne Jobin, says she considers the Sunday jams her worship and dance her prayer. “I might come into a class feeling like, ‘Ugh, I’ve had a rough week,’ but I always feel better afterward,” she says. “It’s exercise first of all, but there’s something more to it. You’re connecting with people. It’s really good for the heart and the soul.” □