

Musings on Yoga: Salmon Dance

Yin Space, November 2021

For what is dance but life truly lived.

Dear **‘yin drawn,’**

The growing dark is a time to dance! Playfully, through piles of leaves, sensually in warm kitchens, wildly along storm swept beaches and perhaps occasionally, caringly mindfully distanced flowing with others. For what is dance but life truly lived in a moment of time.



Wave

Photograph by Alicia Lawrence

All around us salmon are coming home, returning to the creeks and rivers of their birth, somehow having navigated through the wild, wide depths of the ocean over a lifetime. (*Refrains of “I’m going home” sung by Dr. Frank N Furter in the Rocky Horror Picture Show....reverberating energies of Halloween/Samhain mistiness still tickling my ears, my writing, making me muse, is there a salmon somewhere singing?:*) Chum and Coho, Chinook return to begin the dance up the rivers of their birth, leaping rocks, pushed back, pushing forward, *a leap to the left*, swirling with others, *a hop to the right*, always moving forward. They move with intention, completely present to the action of creating life and then dying within the greater cycle of life.

I find myself wondering whether they are aware of how their returning home provides a deep seasonal pulse of nourishment to the many species who live on the west coast of the Pacific from bear to eagle, raven, along with all the many small organisms that feast on their dying bodies. Feeding even the trees, which absorb the nutrients of their bodies dropped at their roots. Holding the banks of the rivers together maintaining the ‘stage’ for their dance. To the indigenous peoples who have longed sustained themselves on the gifting of salmon, and other wild beings, constructing a cohesive vibrant culture of gratitude and balance. Salmon understanding perhaps, in this potent moment, their place in the inter-connection-ness of all things that Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing” - energy and materials, thoughts, feelings and actions all woven within this tapestry of place that we call home.

It stirs me to consider the question yet again, of where, or what is home? And what is our relationship to that home? What does it mean to come home? Is it a place, a structure, a cluster of relationships, a sense of self? How do we create home? In this world of change, from growing up, to shifting homelands as refugees, or evolving relationships...our homes as structures, places and relationships are both deeply meaningful, and change as we move through the oceans of our lives. And as with anything, when do we stand firm, moving up current and when do we flow more easily downstream, perhaps even to let go? Appreciating as well, how our cultures of conditioning shape these questions of home. Questions that could take us in so many directions.

Certainly the traditional first peoples on this point of the west coast where the salmon return and these words are crafted, the *ləkʷəŋən*, treat this place as home. Have cared for it with gratitude and respect for thousands of years. Understood their reciprocal relationship to the many beings that live here, along with how the currents and tides, storms and patterns of rainfall of this ocean have shaped place. When we understand the structures and flow of energies of a place, be they economies or ecologies, along the beings that live there, we may choose to dwell more responsibly and compassionately in making it home. This is some of the basic work of climate justice so needed in the world of now. Looking after our own wee home places on this blue marble of a planet hanging in space on which we live.

As I envision these multitudes of salmon returning to their home streams on the west coast after having lived many years travelling the ocean, I am reminded of Basho's words "the journey itself is home". That even as we construct a sense of home as a location, or structure, or a weave of relationships, there is one within each of us as well. One that we may choose to return to each time we come to our yoga practice, our mat, our body, or our breath to enquire, to explore, to become our more whole selves. Choosing to manifest our truth on our mats with movement and stillness, we may come home to ourselves.

A key step that can help us begin to settle ourselves when we are profoundly unsettled is to come home, to ourselves, in this moment, whatever is happening. This is one way of speaking about mindfulness, or being present: coming home to ourselves. When we bring our mind back to our body we come home. We could consider this state as our true home. This home inside of us is a home no one can take away from us, and it cannot be damaged or destroyed. No matter what happens around us, if we can find this home inside of us, we are always safe.

When we touch this experience of coming home, it is like we have finally arrived home after a long journey. We experience a sense of peace and even freedom, no matter how confining the outer circumstances. Coming home to ourselves feels like belonging; it is a state that holds us and enables us to hold others. This is so important because we can live our whole lives estranged from this home within ourselves.

- Kaira Jewell Lingo in We are made for these times (Parallax Press, 2021)

Our external home/s, as in the life of salmon from river to ocean and back to river, over time will change. We are born, and some will stay put while others move to

new places, inhabit new structures, adapting to shifting relationships and perceptions of life. Within this movement, coming home to ourselves asks of us to bring the same ways of nourishing, maintaining, retrofitting, caring for the land and relationships that are woven into these homes, into our bodies, hearts and minds as we practice. As we settle into a yin pose, or any pose, dancing with gratitude and kindness, non-judgement at times and a commitment to deeply listen, to our thoughts and feelings and sensations. Each practice, another opportunity to be home in ourselves, nurturing our own resilience and openness, allowing us to nourish all the relationships in our lives.

This time of fall can be such an amazing time to look to the ocean, out into the Salish Sea that surrounds many of us, watching the turbulence of the waves above even as we sense the quiet that lies below. Just as we in our yin yoga practice we may drop below the turbulence of our thinking and feeling of the day into a nourishing and connecting deep quiet for a few moments in butterfly, or sphinx, or a reclined twist. Settling into a quiet space where inspiration, clarity and interconnection may bubble up into our noticing. Feeling too, deep in the ocean around the movement of the salmon returning homes as creeks cool and swell with fall rains.

A Practice: Dropping beneath the waves....

First read these words through slowly...picturing the movements, images and sounds. Then settle into your seat or pose focusing on the movement of your breath moving in and out as the tides ebb and flow, waves rise and fall on a fall ocean day, and softly, safely descend...

*.....**Picture yourself safely floating in the waves** all about you. Waves made up of random thoughts and feelings. Pulsing, moving, turbulent at times, softly swirling at others. Then, breathing easily, fully, allow yourself to begin to sink slowly beneath the wave action into the embrace of the still darkness of the ocean. Breath is easy. Let the wave action of your thoughts and feelings remain on the surface as you descend into the sweet calm and quiet of the depths. Whenever your mind wanders, lifting you back to the surface of the ocean to the movement of the waves, notice (perhaps naming 'thinking' or 'feeling' if that is part of your practice) and then let yourself sink again into the soft, safe depths. Each time you lift to the surface, feeling your thinking and feeling 'waves' moving all around you. Notice again, and then gently sink again into the quiet below. Allow whatever shows up to simply be noticed, returning again and again to your gentle breathing. At times there might be a feeling of coming home - feeling a sense of belonging and safety. A place where you can be ALL of you.Off in the distance you might notice the sounds of humpback whales, or feel the schools of salmon flowing past on their way home to the rivers and creeks, or whatever beings live within your local web of life. Feel the richness and aliveness of this place. You might notice glimmers of the ocean that lies within you that meets with all beings, all consciousness as you float. Rising back to the waves on the surface of thinking and feeling when you are ready, or when it happens, as it will.*

This is a darkening time of the year inviting us to drop and dance into the soft dark depths below the waves of thinking and feeling; listening deeply, nourishing

ourselves in all our dimensions with the practices we delight in during the seasons of fall and winter. I encourage you to take your seat, to come home to yourself, even as the salmon return home to their rivers and creeks, opening in the way of salmon to care for the next generations, even as they gift self to the web of life all around them. Whether you are drawn to the deep, mindful, slowness of yin yoga in *Yin Space*, or the exuberant heat of vinyasa, both, or some balancing blend, or another of the many systems of yoga I encourage you to find your mat, your teacher/s, your practice/s, your place/s....your home, and practice.

Listen, the salmon are dancing, coming home, gifting of themselves to all.

in weaving,
Yin Space

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I am grateful to be able to live and share this ancient and evolving practice of yoga on the traditional territories of the ɫəkwəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt Nations) Peoples.