

Even If We Never Get to Carnegie Hall

Certain principles hold true; it's just a matter of how much we bring them into expression. Everything falls along a spectrum of course, and even if we don't set our goals on getting to Carnegie Hall, the adage still applies: the only way to get anywhere worth going is to practice, practice, practice. A posting by my friends at Toward Harmony Tai Chi in Northampton stirred my thinking recently with the statement: *You are what you practice*. In other words, that which has the deepest and most long lasting impact is not what we do occasionally, but what we do day after day. So as the New Year comes round again I ask you, what is it that you are practicing?

Practice to me means conscious commitment and focused repetition. It suggests applying oneself with intention to strengthen a capacity or skill. Learning a musical instrument or training the voice come to mind, and I've been long on the record in support of such activities, at any point in life. Any sort of fitness pursuit as well could be described as a practice, as could artistic processes like weaving or painting. So too might we make a practice out of how we approach a meeting or doing the dishes. The external demands of the task become the mirror in which we can see ourselves in action. Are we steady or relaxed, distracted or impatient? How is the breathing, what does the chattering mind tell us, what are the feelings just in this moment? What one makes of those observations, over time, are the nourishing fruits of practice.

Now how do we see the difference between a practice and a habit? Is reading the newspaper or walking the dog each morning a practice? Can one say, "It is my practice to eat a bowl of ice cream each night?" Well of course call it what you will, but these things to me only become practice when they are done with purpose. For example one might say "When I eat ice cream I use it as a moment of savoring something delicious, being present with something that brings me joy, or perhaps most importantly, strengthening my muscle of knowing when enough is enough. And when I read the paper I might commit to making sure I am free of distractions, then scan all the headlines but choose just two stories to read fully. The principle in this case may be to avoid being overwhelmed with media noise or of taxing one's noticeably challenged ability to store and retrieve information. When walking the dog maybe it's for a week of consciously noting seasonal changes, weather patterns or one's own gait.

Now for most of us unenlightened mortals, we can only accomplish brief periods of real practice in a day. In fact I suggest that the way to approach practice is in small doses where we bring full attention, then allow ourselves to fall back into the muddy world of the rest of our day. In the chair yoga I bring to Friday Friends (coming soon to Northampton), that practice is a series of movements where I ask participants to use of tools of breath and focused internal and external gaze to slowly reconnect with life in the body. It's one hour a week explored in two minute segments but, practiced week after week, the benefits add up. For some of us just showing up is the core of our practice, because that's where things happen. Somedays I'm on my game and some days not, but if I'm not on the field (at my loom, at my desk, in the pool, on my mat...) I'm just not in the game. And though we will likely never make it to the Olympic podium or to Carnegie Hall, its practice that keeps us building our life. So what are you practicing?