

Hate It When They Say "from the top!" in Aerobics Class? by Molly Lay

I'm thinking "I can't think anymore. I don't want to have to think. I've been hard at it all day! I'm here for a break!" But, no. Here we go again, grapevine (what IS that?) right, grapevine left, three knees, four lunges right, four lunges left, two squats, hop together, clap, hamstring curl left, and behind, hamstring curl right, and behind, three steps up, two knees (is there MORE?), four kicks and tap out, three steps back, squat, jump together, clap. Got it? (surely you jest!) Okay! From the top!

Well, right here in Virginia-Highlands at the Northeast Intown YWCA (yeah, the renovated building that looks like a church just up the street from Aurora Coffee) I have discovered an aerobics class I can love.

On Tuesday and Thursday nights at 6:50 pm the elevator doors slide open and the participants straggle in. I usually feel slightly ruffled, burned out and looking forward to the Full Circle class. As I look around, I greet those I know and some of them look more stressed than me, while others look fresh, chipper, and just plain happy (I resolve to talk to them after class). The instructor moves among us, asking new faces about their fitness levels, handicaps or injuries she needs to be aware of.... diabetes, asthma, etc. She knows everyone by name!

Bodies-in-Motion instructors always make sure we know why we are in class and the reasons are as varied as the people: To get away from the kids, to reduce stress, to focus entirely on ourselves for 90 minutes; to prepare for a sporting event or wedding; to get stronger; to breathe more deeply. Whatever. My reasons are simple:

Ninety minutes away from the phones, fax and beeper.

Bare feet.

100% low impact

Soft lighting

Beautiful room

Quiet. No chatter.

Salute to the Sun

No head-banger music

Safe

Emphasis on fitness/strength -- no mention of "thin" or "fat".

Long, steady, non-stop aerobic segment

No stopping for heart rates. RPE (rate of perceived exertion) taught. Sweats, shorts, t-shirts. No thongs. Do the move until we've "worked it" and then move on. Total relaxation in the dark

I go even when I have a raging headache or am so tired I can't lift my head, because I know we will begin at the bottom of the "Circle" (which I love...all quietness and centering our minds) and I'll be ready for the push when we get to the top. I also know when we arrive at the bottom again, I'll feel much better. And, ready for bed.

The woman in front of me has so many holes in her sweats, she wears them all through the summer. "Ventilation" she says. This is not a "chatty" group, however; the dynamic of the class, supported by the instructor, is that we're here to work out... together. We gain energy from moving in synch. Some real friendships have formed, though, and I glean from their greetings that they communicate outside of class. But, no cliques, no networking, and no "business" seem to be the code here. It's time to be fully present.

After a short warm-up we "stretch" with the Salute to the Sun, which is a beautiful series of Yoga moves. No matter that the sun is setting about the time we begin (or long down in winter), the moves address each part of our body that needs preparation for what is to come.

Nearly always, we do some balance moves. These are a real challenge for me. Just about the time I get centered enough to stand on one foot, our instructor says, "Okay, now, if you can, close your eyes." Right. My eyes are glued to a spot on the honey-colored hardwood floor to keep my gyroscope from going off kilter. But, with eyes open I can see the others closing theirs and challenging themselves to keep in balance, to find themselves steady in their little part of the universe, toes occasionally touching down to stop the fall. So I always try, even for a few seconds, to close my eyes, just to experience the surprise I feel when I peek and discover I am falling.

Now we're stretched and centered, so we get moving. After a series of upper body strengthening exercises using bands and weights, we go on a journey of moves, best described as crossing a stream, stepping from one stone to another, finding the benefit and balance of each step before moving on. All I can call it is "standing strength". I am strengthening my lower body, and my heart just seems to come right along, pumping harder and harder. When we reach the peak of the

long aerobic segment, Anna reminds us to quietly observe our bodies... how is my breathing? How is my heartbeat? Do I feel good? Do I feel dizzy? Can I do more? Should I do less? All the while she is watching our faces closely and visiting face-to-face any who concern her, making them talk to her. And, the music. Ahhhhhh, the music. Jazz. Disco. R&B. Ballroom. Blues. Never knew aerobics could be so wonderful.

As we descend the other side of the "Circle", cooling and stretching our hot muscles, we each grab a mat to prepare for some serious abdominal work. This class is known for the awesome abdominal workouts. I swear this instructor could go on forever, and actually speak the whole time! Only about 10 minutes long but our groans and grunts and slow sighs fill the room. I love the isometric moves (no neck action). Killers. I especially like one that is a series of very, very slow moves that progresses in the true "Full Circle" way, ending with everyone heaving a sigh. Sometimes we all groan or sigh simultaneously and then we all dissolve into a much-needed laughter break.

Then comes the "gift". I look forward to the relaxation more than anything. By this time we have worked hard and focused hard, so for those of us devoted to the Puritan Work Ethic, we have no problem feeling we deserve the next three minutes. A few will just fall asleep and quietly snore, others may cry. Three minutes, in the dark, lying on our mats, with Anna keeping us present and making us relax through her soft vocal guidance. I am not talking New Age. Just pure relaxation technique practice. The few whose occupations I do know (lawyers, psychotherapists, doctoral candidates, mothers) I feel sure descend into the quiet as gratefully as I.

Eventually (sometimes I just lie there in the dark), I put my mat away in the dim light and quietly bid everyone goodnight. At this point, I love everyone. I love my life. I love my boyfriend (well, I guess I did that before I came to class; but now I love him better!), I love my job. I love humanity. And, I know Aurora Coffee is just a few steps away.