

Linda Wellness Warrior: Three Wednesdays

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The word “Yoga” comes from the Sanskrit root word yuj, which means, “to join” or “to yoke.” *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* says,

Definition of Yoga: The first four sutras define Yoga, with that definition being expanded upon in the other sutras. In a systematic process of meditation, you gradually move your attention inward, through all the levels of your being, gaining mastery along the way (1.2). Eventually you come to rest in your true nature, which is beyond all of those levels (1.3). This action and the realization of this center of consciousness is the meaning of *Yoga* (Bharati 2011).

This essay tells the story of a Wellness Warrior. This is the journey of an African-American woman connecting with her ancestors and finding balance in predominantly white yoga studios. I chose to be a survivor on the mat, no longer a victim of “workaholism,” depression, disordered eating, or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Now I am designing spaces for yogis and yoginis of color to share practice and discuss their interpretation of yogic practice.

I am a woman living with disordered eating and clinical depression. I am workaholic in recovery. I have fought an uphill battle to be standing in this truth, my truth. I’ve spent most of my adult life battling depression and shrinking to make others feel more comfortable in my presence. This is the story of me turning my attention inward and embracing my Wellness Warrior spirit while sharing my practice with other survivors on yoga mats.

The first time I encountered yoga, I didn’t know it was yoga. The concept of yoga was foreign to me. When I was an undergraduate at Temple University in Pennsylvania, I took a six week-long Kemetic yoga class sponsored by the Pan-African Studies department. I was excited to try something from ancient Africa. Kemetic Yoga is the Egyptian system of yoga enlightenment based upon the practices of physical movements combined with controlled deep breathing and meditation. The practice uses postures from the hieroglyphics. As you take on tree pose, you embody the trunk then the branches and leaves. I must have blocked out this experience because it I was ashamed that I couldn’t keep up. I remembered that I wouldn’t keep still and that I spent more time worried about the clock than staying in the postures.

My next experience with yoga was as a VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America). At that time, I had a boss who would get mad when I needed clarification, which made me more self-conscious about my intellectual abilities. I found physical therapy and coping strategies with Svaroopa Yoga. Svaroopa Yoga focuses on releasing the body’s tensions in the muscles wrapped around and connected to the spine. I loved that class because we used lots of props: blankets, straps and blocks. I would even fall into a deep sleep, snoring during Savasana. I remembered

feeling safe, comforted, and warm like I was being held like a baby. Though I loved my classes, I didn't know they were a brand of yoga and it would take a few more years before I delved into the study of yoga. Unfortunately, a tragic event brought me back to the mat.



Figure 1- Wellness Warrior Ceremony. Wellness Warrior Groove. Maine Yoga Festival 2017. My First Time Teaching at a Yoga Festival (Photo Credit: Kait Strait).

First Wednesday: Breath Work

On Wednesday Jan 10, 2010, my life was forever changed: “Around 3 p.m. Wednesday, Livingston police along with the Sumter County sheriff’s department and University of West Alabama police responded to a shooting at the high school, Welborn said. When authorities arrived, they found a female teacher, who had been shot multiple times, on the sidewalk near the school’s front entrance.” (Grayson 2010)

Starrick Morgan Grey, one my closest maternal cousins, was murdered by her husband. I didn’t leave my bed for three days after receiving the call. My cousin was murdered by the man that promised to love, cherish, and honor her in sickness and in health. I felt broken. I felt for her children, mother, and twin brother.

At the time, I had been working sixty hours a week for nearly three years. I have been ambitious and goal-driven my entire life. I was taught that you set a goal, create a plan, and achieve as many of the goals you set out to achieve. My body was exhibiting stress warning

symptoms. I just wasn't ready to deal with that. I always thought I had time to start a diet or workout routine later, maybe next weekend.

The message I received from my parents was if I wanted to be successful as an African-American woman, I needed to outpace my contemporaries and the competition. Gillian B. White writes, "For decades, Black parents have told their children that in order to succeed despite racial discrimination, they need to be 'twice as good': twice as smart, twice as dependable, twice as talented." (2015). These messages were reinforced by those closest to me such as my aunts and professional mentors who actively practiced "presentism." Presentism is showing up to work when you have a short-term illness or chronic health issue. No matter what, press through adversity. Be resilient. Pop a daytime cold pill and go to work. My grandmother, who was Starrick's aunt, always said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." My faith in Grandma's words prepared me for the day that I would lose myself in my work and lose a loved one who was discovering her self-worth.

I was also receiving messages that I should be altruistic, work hard, and serve my Black community. I spent my early thirties managing a community center in a housing development. The Chinese-American young adults I mentored would come by my office to check on me. They would do this because they knew I was usually still in the office way after nine o'clock every Friday night. My idea of a good time was checking off tasks on my to-do list and developing systems for the center. My office had one of those metal gates to keep people out. Instead, I would lock myself inside. My mentees, who lived in apartments above my office building, would bang on the gate and say, "Linda, go home."

I was working on building my career in nonprofit management and youth worker advocacy. A youth worker is anyone who works with young people, ages 6-21. The Youth Workers' Alliance mission was to support youth workers to promote the well-being of community's young people through collaborative activities such as information sharing, skill-building, problem-solving, leadership development, and issue orientated advocacy. In the Spring of 2009, I attended a Youth Workers' Alliance annual retreat where I went to a workshop on burnout with fellow youth workers from the neighborhood I served. The entire room of seasoned youth workers looked at me while the presenter was listing symptoms of burnout. Symptoms of burnout include weight gain, physical and emotional exhaustion, chronic illness, isolation, and detachment. My associates and fellow youth workers knew I was burnt out but I didn't. It took me two years to address my burn out. It took me one year to see the work habits I'd adopted weren't healthy for me nor were they sustainable.

At Starrick Morgan Grey's homegoing service, her twin brother eulogized her, speaking about the things he noticed in his sister's home on Linda Lane. He saw Post-it notes everywhere, on every mirror, and on the front door. These were affirmations of her passion, brilliance, beauty and faith.

"Faith" is what Starrick looked to when she told her second husband, her soon-to-be-killer, "I don't think this is working." I remember her telling me that her first husband thought she couldn't do any better than him. He told her that she was fat with two children and that no one else would want that. "You don't think I can find someone else," she asked him, "Well, I found you and you wanted me – fat with one child as will someone else." She stopped letting fear and a sense of unworthiness get in the way of finding her joy and healing her brokenness. From then on, I knew I needed to start focusing on my healing.

In Starrick's darkest hour, as her second marriage was ending, she had taken another

leap. She had always struggled with her weight and Diabetes. In 2009, she underwent gastric bypass surgery. She was feeling good about herself and loving the woman of faith she had become. As darkness began to fall upon her home life, she focused her attention on God, writing biblical scriptures and “I am” statements on Post-it notes. I am beauty. I am able. I am capable. I am strong. I am worthy.

Her death moved me to a life-coaching program called Live by Design with Muadi Dibinga in 2010. I even hired Muadi Dibinga as my “life strategist.” She specialized in teaching people how to invite more peace and joy into their lives. I decided to seek and find joy. I wanted to treat this world as my playground. I was going to seek wellness. I was going to live my best life in the moment. I wanted to honor Starrick’s legacy by doing more of the things that brought me joy. Before working with Muadi, when I was asked what I liked doing, all I could say is “I don’t know, I’m working on figuring that out.” I started to seek out things that reinforced a healthy, active, lifestyle. I was going to find my passion as I played. I don’t know if, prior to working with Muadi, I’d ever been told, “It’s okay to take time for yourself.”

My life coach set up a Wellness Workshop featuring Leslie Salmon Jones, founder of Afro Flow Yoga. Afro Flow Yoga celebrates the African Diaspora. It is a yogic practice infusing electrifying dance movements of the African Diaspora with a meditative yoga sequence of gentle yet powerful stretches and healing live music. In her classes, I felt like something deep inside me woke up. I became grounded in my stance and outstretched my arms. As I began to reach and turn, my wrists and arms, in and out, out and in, I was reclaiming my strength, a strength that felt like I was breaking through an invisible wall. She had us call out for what we wanted in our lives. She used a metaphor, “Envision you are planting seeds of your future healing. We are going to create stew of what our heart desires.” She spoke of African spirituality and how yoga existed in ancient Africa and Southeast Asia.

Leslie was the first Black woman yoga teacher I met that founded and branded her own yoga style. I experienced Afro Flow Yoga, the drum, my heartbeat and I felt empowered. I danced. I smiled so hard that my face hurt. Euphoria came over me as I took my meditative walk back to my mat for Savasana. I found myself in a pool of tears, feeling the deepest connection with the Holy Trinity and my body. Who knew this would become my ministry and a discipline?



**Figure 2 – Wellness Warrior Groove. Maine Yoga Festival 2017.
My first time teaching at a Yoga Festival (Photo Credit: Kait Strait).**

Second Wednesday: Warrior Two

On Wednesday March 30, 2011, I flipped.

I told my Executive Director that I needed to leave after being degraded, discounted, and belittled for the last time. Something told me to pack it in. I wasn't coming back to this toxic environment. I packed up all of my workplace belongings and walked out. I called my friend Maria and said, "I left! Girl, I packed up my stuff and walked out." Maria and I remained friends after completing a Teaching Fellowship together where we had learned new ways to work harder (and not smarter) in the name of education reform and social justice. Maria is a Mexican-American woman from the south side of Chicago who remained in Boston after college. She is the person who reintroduced me to yoga as an adult. She took a work-study position at a local yoga studio in South Boston. She never missed her favorite classes or shifts. I offered her a free ticket to a Lauryn Hill concert and she declined because she had a yoga class. That's how committed she was.

It was that same Maria that met me at a coffee shop after I walked out of my job and my old life. My adrenaline was still pumping; I was well into an anxiety attack. I found my breath. I started to breathe. I started to feel all the tension I was holding. The weight finally lifted from my shoulders, much like that feeling you get in backbends and heart openers. You feel like you're radiating sunlight from your center. We took a mindful breath together. Yoga was there for me.

When I finally started making time for myself, Maria invited me to one of her favorite classes at South Boston Yoga and I accepted apprehensively. Yoga on that side of town felt weird. I had never been to South Boston except to go to the beaches. From the beginning, yoga was an invitation to cross an invisible barrier and find my edge.

The physical practice of yoga taught me to find my boundaries and go at my own pace. My yoga teachers kept saying, "You aren't in competition with anyone. Our bodies don't move in the same ways. Use the breath to embody the posture in a way that serves your body. You are not in competition with anyone and yoga is for everybody. This is your opportunity to unwind and heal what aches." My mind was blown. I attended classes back-to-back some days. As I mentioned earlier, I really like overdoing things.

Growing up, South Boston was forbidden to African-Americans like myself. It was a predominantly Irish-American neighborhood on the water. I crossed that mental color line with Maria. She introduced to me Slow flow with Joanne "JoJo" Flaherty on one crisp Sunday afternoon. JoJo is a tall, Caucasian woman, with curly hair and long legs. She looked like the yoga teacher we see represented in the media all the time.

I placed my rented yoga mat in front of Maria because I needed to be in the front row. I remember the class being packed. We were the only visible people of color in the class. We were probably the thickest in size too. I did not pay much attention to this at the time because I always seem to be the only Black girl in so many spaces and places.

JoJo spoke in her thick Bostonian accent, "Does anyone have any injuries? Is this anyone's first yoga class?" My arm shot up: Yes, me!

That first yoga class in South Boston, JoJo said, "We are going to do 'Forest' Yoga today in honor of the weather." I was like, "Forest? What in the hell are we going to do, turn into trees?" I mean, she did look and sound like she had smoked lots of "trees." Instead, we focused on the breath; we breathed into the poses and held them. We worked our abs. Oh, those Ana Forrest Yoga core exercises were such a good pain. It was an extremely challenging class.

Despite this, I quickly adopted the attitude that I was going to be a scholar and try to do everything. I wanted to see what JoJo was doing and mimic it. Soon, I was shooting into a strong, low lunge. Then a crescent lunge and twists moving my belly fat to the side. As I was working my body into these contortions, I had all types of dialogue running through my head about what I “can’t” do and why.

The dialogue went something like, “I’m not flexible!” When it came to downward facing dog, I thought, “You want me to shoot my butt up in the air and put all this weight in my hands? I’m too fat. I hope I don’t split my pants. Look at her perfect downward facing dog. What am I going to eat later? Am I doing this right?” Then JoJo came over and gave me an adjustment by lifting my hips and passing her hand along my spine allowing my neck and head to relax. She then told me, “it’s okay if you put your forearms and knees down to take a break.”

“A break,” I thought, “How am I going to learn if I don’t do every part? I don’t want people thinking I can’t do it.” But, I took lots of breaks and she showered me with words of encouragement. Her hands-on-assists were a form of reassurance that I wasn’t alone. She was there to take care of me, not shame me.

After a while, Maria and I laughed and giggled with each other. I cussed out Maria and JoJo in my head and maybe dropped an F-bomb a few times. Maria was doing all this “fanciness” with her legs and hips. I can remember seeing her doing plow pose where you take your legs and put them over your head. You could see an ease overtake her spirit. Thank God, I have since learned that yoga is a mind, body, and spiritual practice that takes time. I’ve learned to be gentle with myself. I recognize that my teaching now reflects a deep sense of “I know where you are and you can take your time. Feel it. Move through it. Take what you need and let the rest go.”

I didn’t learn these lessons right away. I was afraid of commitment to gym and exercise, I discontinued going after that class with JoJo. It took me about a year to return to the mat. Burn-out, grief, and sadness brought me back to the mat. Domestic violence and homicide arrived at my doorstep.

I contacted Leslie Salmon Jones and asked if she’d mentor me as I went through my career transition. I realized that I needed to surround myself with people living a healthy and active lifestyle. Leslie took me under her wing; she mentored me for two years and became a close friend. She helped me find the yoga in all things. I started to lose weight and my perpetual grey cloud was occasionally replaced by sunshine. Leslie is one of those people who shines when you see her. She embodies *Namaste* (the light in me recognizes and honors the light in you). She glows. And you begin to see that you are a reflection of those people you spend the most time with.

Third Wednesday: Humble Warrior

By January 2012, I was practicing three-hours of yoga every Wednesday evening and also cleaning the studio as a work-study student. Investing financially in yoga was expensive; I couldn’t see myself paying \$18 to \$20 for a single workout. Agreeing to work-study at South Boston Yoga Center, I earned unlimited classes and I took full advantage of this. My *Asana* (physical) yoga practice became my workout and therapy as I figured out my next chapter. I ultimately earned my yoga teacher certification from South Boston Yoga Center on August 24, 2013.

JoJo saw me on Saturday and Tuesday after her classes. Then, one Wednesday, as I walked past her on the staircase after having decided to take a *Vinyasa* (flow) class and a restorative class back-to-back, JoJo looked into my eyes and said, “Don’t stop, Warrior.” It was invigorating to be seen for my commitment to myself. To find a community that encouraged me to invest in my own self-care and healing was like recharging my battery. It charged my battery for 365 days, a self-imposed yoga challenge. That yoga challenge led me to explore yoga beyond a 90 minute exercise routine for losing weight. There is *Pranayama* (Breath Work) and Meditation, which isn’t just sitting in silence because you can do meditative movements to music and journey dance.

Four years as a yoga teacher has taught me that you have to try things that you fear. There is medicine in those postures and classes that I F.E.A.R. (False Evidence Appearing Real), and this will strengthen you when, and if, you make it to the other side. You can attempt things without pain. You can ease in by using the breath to stop and pause. My teaching reflects joy and my authenticity. My students are encouraged to take what they need from the practice and let the rest go. I am sure to remind them that this is their practice. If you something does not feel right stop. Ask questions.



Figure 3 - Franklin Park Yoga Summer Series 2017 (Photo Credit: Maurice Wilkey).

Yoga has opened me up to taking ownership for my happiness and peace of mind. As I learned to listen to my body, and give it what it needed, it gave me more. I became more of me. I started to release the habits that no longer served me and embraced a new paradigm. This yoga journey has led me to invest in my identity as an African-American and yogini (woman who practices yoga). I am learning the ancient medicine that has been given to us. I am still healing; I have to remind myself to do what serves my healthy self. This means weighing things based on their alignment with my vision for life. I know that wellness is my birthright. Death taught me how to reconcile my feelings and take ownership over finding alignment and balance in all areas of my life. Take my attraction to Wednesday, for instance. Wednesday is considered “hump day” in Western culture, the midway point of our seven days. Wednesday is ruled by planet Mercury, which is full of contradictions, divination, change, and communication. According to the Ifá Oracles of African spirituality, Mercury manifests through the Òrìṣà Elegua. Elegua is the Opener of the Way. On Wednesdays, I accepted his invitation and to walk the path of change.

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
is Change.

God
is Change (Butler 1998)

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Linda N. Wells is the Wellness Warrior. Before pursuing a career in promoting wellness, Wells was a Program Director, Youth Worker and community organizer. She spent nearly 10 years giving more to others than she did to herself, limiting her ability to create positive change for herself and her community. Linda has since transferred her skills as an educator and activist to become a well-known health advocate and Wellnesspreneur in the Boston area.
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