

“Going Against Gravity” by Jim Van Buskirk
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“Set up for handstand,” Janet, my yoga instructor, announces. “Adho Mukha Vriksasana.”

Following her instructions, I plant my palms firmly on the floor about five inches from the wall, my arms extended with elbows straight, and my legs about three feet behind me. It feels fun at age fifty to be kneeling on the ground.

I kick up my right leg but it doesn’t get very far before falling to the floor with an un-yogic thud. I try again. We are supposed to bring our legs up over our head. I peek across at my classmates along the wall. Others seem to be making better progress. I try again. I can’t do it. Gravity is working against me. Frustrated, I finally ask for help.

“Kick up with your right leg,” Janet encourages me. As I do, she swiftly grabs first my right leg and then my left, pushing them up to the wall.

Suddenly I am there: completely upside down. I lock my elbows and straighten my legs toward the ceiling. I am up! I am doing it! I laugh like a kid, exhilarated at being inverted. I savor the sensation of looking at the world topsy-turvy. But suddenly the joy empties from my body and is replaced with fear. My brain begins to betray my body. What if I fall? I forget Janet is there, gently holding my legs against the wall.

“Did you do this when you were a kid?” she asks after a moment.

“I was never a kid,” I quip. The rest of the class laughs. I focus on my breathing.

After a few more moments, Janet lets go and helps me get my feet back on the ground. Bringing my legs over my head until I can touch the floor is scary. My difficulty is not just my lack of physical flexibility, as with many other of the yoga poses; it’s about being afraid.

After class I mentioned my insight. Janet agrees. Then I tell her that it was true that I’d never really been a kid. She smiles, but doesn’t seem to understand.

The next day I tell my therapist, too. Harvey nods in agreement. “You were never a kid,” he repeats solemnly.

I sit on the couching facing him, holding his gaze. I try to let this realization sink in. I look into his dark, warm eyes without turning away.

“I’ve stopped breathing,” I suddenly announce. I realize that I’m not ready to let in the enormity of this information I’m afraid of going with him into this scary place. We talk about what just happened: why I made a decision not to stay in that moment, not to

allow him in. Not to let in the pain and anger of having been denied an essential phase of my own development.

“I don’t know how to do it,” I whine.

“Do what?” Harvey challenges. I realize that I don’t know exactly what “it” is. For all my verbal and mental ability, I’m often frustratingly obtuse. My intellect has always been my survival mechanism. First to escape the tyranny of my mother, then to avoid intimacy with others, including – I’m now starting to see – myself.

“I’m going against gravity,” I say, remembering my handstand and failed efforts to understand how to be in the world a different way.

Harvey smiles. “Gravity in all senses of the word.”

I don’t smile. I know it’s true. It’s as if, having been robbed of a childhood full of fun, I don’t know how to play. I force myself to remain solemn, dignified. Part of our work together is to instill a sense of letting go. It can’t be pouted on top, I realize, it has to be recovered from within. That’s the hard part. I take the process so seriously. I want to be a good boy, a good patient. But I can’t seem to comprehend that the real road to success is filled with playfulness, not seriousness.

After the session I look up “gravity” in the dictionary. I notice another meaning, one that hadn’t occurred to me at the time: “The natural force of attraction between any two massive bodies.”

I’ve spent my life unknowingly resisting that force of attraction with family, friends, lovers,-- and now even Harvey. I’ve been afraid to let anyone see in, to acknowledge the importance of intimacy.

If, as the clichéd saying goes, the eyes are the windows to the soul, then I’ve kept my eyes shut, avoiding mirrors, refusing to look into any else’s eyes, fearful that they might want to look into mine. I think of all the years I have lost, and I weep.

The tears relieve my rigidity. I feel my body soften, my defenses drop. I sink into a different way of being. Strange to have to learn to play at age fifty. Better late than never, I chuckle. Again I think of Harvey and handstands, and hope: maybe I am beginning to go against gravity.