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Jennifer Davis-Berman

University of Dayton, jdavisberman1@udayton.edu

Jean Farkas

Bridge to Health Ohio

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Social Work, Yoga, and Gratitude: Partnership in a Homeless Shelter

Jennifer Davis-Berman and Jean Farkas

Abstract: This narrative explores the personal lessons learned about life and practice from YogaHome, a yoga program for homeless adults. The yoga program, taught in partnership by a social worker/professor of social work (Jenny) and a yoga teacher (Jean) with 17 years of experience, exemplifies the merging of social work and yogic practices, but also illustrates the evolution of these two professionals in their chosen fields as many of their traditional views, values, intentions, and expectations unraveled and led to a re-evaluation of their professional practices, transforming their personal perspectives on life. This reflection is based on the YogaHome program, originally planned as a six-week intervention that is still going strong after 16 months.

Keywords: social work; yoga; women's shelter; homeless; gratitude

Setting the Stage

Jenny: I am a social work professor and clinician and have been a regular volunteer for decades at a large overnight homeless shelter in a medium sized Midwestern city. One of my research projects involved conducting interviews with shelter residents about their experiences with shelter life. Through these conversations, one of the most common themes that I heard was how chaotic it was to live in a homeless shelter. For example, one woman talked about how difficult it was sometimes even to have a conversation due to the noise level in the shelter. Sometimes, she said, she just had to cry.

Picture 75 or more women living in close quarters, sleeping (or trying to sleep) in a large room, bed to bed, tempers flaring, and fights breaking out over day to day occurrences. A large noisy common room with TVs blaring, is the only gathering place during the day. Illness spreads rapidly in these close living arrangements, but those that are sick lie down, spread out on top of two to three hard chairs, a coat over them for a blanket, or lie on dirty mattresses on the floor of the locker room. Poor health is the result of little or no healthcare, poor nutrition, no exercise, frequent accidents typical of a marginal lifestyle, and stress. As a social worker, I wanted to find a way to help lessen the stress of living in this setting. I began practicing yoga about three years ago as a tool to use in managing my own life-long tendencies toward anxiety and insomnia, so it seemed as if it might be helpful, even therapeutic, to bring this experience to women in the shelter. I asked Jean Farkas, a certified yoga instructor with long-standing experience in social

services, to partner with me in this venture. Jean has been my neighbor for years, and I have been in her yoga class, but we didn't know each other all that well at this time.

Jean: I have to admit I had a few qualms about doing this, but I trusted and respected Jenny and looked forward to trying something new. After all, a tenet of yoga philosophy is service, so I entered into this endeavor gladly and, I thought, with an open mind.

Jenny: I approached this planning as the “expert” social worker developing this program to improve the lives of these clients. Having secured permission from the shelter administration, a small room to use with a window and a door to shut out the noise, and a list of interested women, Jean and I were ready to embark on a six-week long yoga program. As a good social worker with an eye toward evaluating this practice, I was armed with my research instruments. I would measure depression, anxiety, stress...you name it; I was going to measure it and be able to show the effects of teaching yoga with this cohort.

Jean and I approached this program well prepared, envisioning six sessions with the same group of women, where we would teach breathing, relaxation, and stress reduction. We also hoped to teach participants techniques they could use after they left the shelter to deal with some of their life stressors. Part of this six-session sequence involved building on yoga stretches, poses, and techniques in order to improve flexibility, and perhaps to reduce pain and stiffness. Jean put lots of time and energy

into planning the classes, sequencing the flows, even developing ways the participants could modify the class to meet their needs. We were volunteers with a good cause and were bound and determined to make a difference!

Reality Sets In

Jenny: The actual process that has occurred in this program has been far from our initial plans, as teachers, social worker, and experts. Expecting our first group to stay for six weeks just demonstrated how naive we really were about homelessness and shelter living. Some women did stay with our program for many weeks, but others were immediately housed or left the shelter. Sometimes a woman who was really enthusiastic about class one week was slumped over a table with her head on her arms the next, or out shopping because she had just received her monthly check. In this setting, there was no warning. From one week to the next, people were housed and those of us who cared about them grieved their departure and celebrated their success without them. We were in the ironic situation of rejoicing that these women had found shelter elsewhere, but were sad to see them go, and curious about their fate. Once residents left the shelter, they were no longer permitted to return. So, we never knew from week to week who would be in class or what their frame of mind or physical condition might be.

Jean: As a long time yoga practitioner, I am fairly flexible physically, and I know with the mind-body connection that a flexible body means a more flexible approach to life. Right! The “flexibility” needed to conduct each class in this setting stretched every part of my being. I quickly threw out any lesson plans, realizing I would need to react in the moment to whoever was in the class that day and whatever they were experiencing – sadness, anxiety, broken bones, asthma attacks, severe mental illness, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, hyperactivity, recent surgery, or pregnancy. Most days we had a mixture of people who could work on the floor on mats and those who needed to sit in a chair. I had to teach to both at once.

Here is a typical class: Angela is complaining of serious knee pain and sits in a chair. Mary complains that she can't breathe due to her false teeth. Christine is on a walker, but can do upper body movements. LaShawn with a broken foot and

nasty cold sits in a chair. Deena, a new student, is on oxygen due to COPD while her daughter, Angie, has serious back pain. The next week Deena and her daughter were in a car accident, in which Deena, who already had trouble breathing, broke some ribs and her daughter further injured her back. We never saw them again.

In any given class I might have anyone from a 22-year-old who, after a few shoulder rolls, collapses in exhaustion on her mat to an ultra-flexible former pole dancer who is double jointed, to a woman so harmed by drugs used to treat schizophrenia that she has impaired mind-body coordination. A benefit of yoga is learning to be more present in the moment. I was learning fast, because in these classes there was no other choice.

Merging Social Work and Yoga

Jean: Every week we arrive a half hour early for class. Jenny is the one who goes out to the great room, makes the rounds, talking to anyone who has been in the class, talking up yoga to those who are new. Her ability to talk to people whatever their circumstance gives YogaHome a presence in the shelter and serves as class recruitment. I'm much more comfortable preparing the yoga room, putting out and cleaning the mats and talking with anyone who comes in early.

Jenny: In social work practice, we are encouraged to promote the client's self-determination and to try to begin to work where the client is. This has been one of our challenges in the yoga program. There have been days where we needed to start by talking about a woman who had died in the shelter the night before. No one was sure what had happened. All we knew was that she died in her sleep in a room with over 75 people. Our women were scared and sad. Another time, we tried to process the grief of a participant whose beloved pet had been euthanized because they no longer could provide a home. Other weeks, women were restless and agitated and wanted to talk throughout the session, or take phone calls. Sometimes, people were so stressed and depleted that they immediately fell into a deep sleep. We quickly learned to throw away the lesson plans we so carefully developed before beginning the program.

Jean: Many times we struggled with our own emotions. Here is a quote from my YogaHome

journal, referencing the euthanized dog.

YogaHome Journal Week 12: A husband and wife and 19-year-old daughter, Angel, have been with us a few weeks. On this day Angel has broken her arm.

Before class, Jenny does a taped interview with another participant, Debbie. Seventeen years ago, her brother was murdered. They treated her for depression at the time, possibly a misdiagnosis, which set her up for years of mental illness. She has now been diagnosed as bi-polar and is on medication, which is helping her. She described how she alienated her entire family, her mother, and her children. She says she tried to kill herself in front of her daughter and mother. She described the pain when her daughter said she could come live with her but never came to pick her up at the bus station.

At the beginning of class Jenny invites Angel to talk about her broken arm. It all revolved around the beloved family dog that a relative agreed to keep, but then euthanized. Angel got in a fight with the relative over the dog and her arm was broken in the struggle.

The pain in our little room is huge. It engulfs me so completely that I fear I can't pull it together to teach the class. There are tears spilling down my checks, not only for the missing dog, but the lady whose last 17 years have been hell. Finally, I invite the class to fold their arms around their hearts and feel the breath, breathing into our emotions and feelings as yoga has taught me. We do that for quite a while before I can go on. I share that I lost my beloved dog five years ago and how I still mourn for him. We do the downward dog pose in honor of dogs, and I share with them the Vanilla Shake, how my dog, whose name was Vanilla, used to get up from a nap and a shake would start at the tip of his long nose and continue down his spine, and roll down his long tail with a great shimmy of his butt. We all do that and laugh. We do the lion (a yoga pose

where you breathe in and then exhale while opening the eyes and mouth wide and letting out a lion's roar) and laugh at ourselves.

Jenny: I look to Jean as the emotional center of this class. Her emotions flow freely and seem to release in rhythm with our physical movement. As a social worker, I have been taught to manage my emotions around clients. At times during yoga class, the pain that I feel takes my breath away, but I often don't reveal this. My strength is reaching out to women, comforting and connecting with them through words.

Jean: I quickly came to appreciate Jenny as a social worker/therapist who had much more experience and knowledge about working with drug addicts and severe emotional and mental illness. In my usual middle-class yoga classes students come in with their crises, which may be serious – a dying father, going through divorce, a sick child, a difficult boss – but no serious mental illness or drug abuse, and no one who has lost everything in their life. I just need to be a good listener. This was much different. Jenny was able to recognize those who were on drugs, those displaying various mental illnesses, those who had been damaged by years of drug use. Although we had very few discipline problems in class, it was a great comfort to me that Jenny was there with her confidence, calm presence, gentle sense of humor, and compassion, which helped establish a safe atmosphere for class.

Jenny: During one session, I noticed from the pre-session questionnaire we asked participants to fill out that one of the women was suicidal. I took her out of class, talked to her, and asked her about suicide. She quickly began to sob, saying that she wanted to give up. Years of poverty, instability, and pain had taken their toll. A kind-hearted staff person and I talked to her, and she agreed to go to the hospital with the police. As I watched her get in the police cruiser, my own heart ached with the pain and suffering that so often goes with being poor. Another day, one of our participants said that she was already dead...well, she was really somewhere between life and death. She recounted an elaborate story about being hit numerous times with a Taser which had caused her near death. I remember glancing over at Jean to see how she was reacting to these delusions. I had worked with delusional

people before, but didn't think that Jean had ever experienced anything like this, especially in a yoga class. As we ended class with relaxation, our participant told us that she couldn't lie down because she would surely die. We told her to stay in an upright position and class continued.

Jean: This woman was a challenge for me. I initially believed her that she had been tased, but as class progressed it became increasingly evident that, even if she had been tased, she was also delusional. I just tried to listen to her comments and alter her positions and movements to reduce her fear of dying. During relaxation she quieted down and seemed content to sit against the wall and keep her eyes open but downcast.

Jenny: Seeing so much mental and physical illness as a social worker has been very painful. It seems like issues of illness and death are with us all the time. Shelter residents not only endure the indignities of poverty, they lead lives at very high risk for illness and injury. A woman named Vodka came to class one day using a walker. She was only about 40-years-old, but had one leg that was five inches shorter than the other. This had become a disability and was caused when her boyfriend at the time threw her out of a window, breaking dozens of bones in her body. I met another woman sitting outside of the shelter in a wheelchair with her foot bandaged and propped up. She had just had major surgery and was released from the hospital down the street to the shelter. I continue to be amazed and upset by how hospitals discharge sick and frail people to the shelter. Cookie was a diabetic with renal failure. A regular participant in our group, she was kind, open and caring. As she continued to deteriorate, she was put on dialysis. Unable to endure the rigors of this procedure, and without the ability to transport herself for treatment, she died shortly after leaving the shelter, alone in an apartment. Her death and the struggles to live and cope with illness among the homeless have led me to my next research project...looking at serious illness and death in the homeless. I guess that when I feel the pain of injustice, my heart tells my head to start working.

The Turning Point: Reflections on Gratitude

Jean: Last Thanksgiving, after working with the shelter guests weekly for over a year, I reflected, as

is my custom, on all the things in my life that I am grateful for: my home, my relationships, family, a successful career, my retreat home in a nature preserve, good health, comfortable finances. Then it hit me – my students in YogaHome have none of these things. No home, no family, no money, poor health, no nature. No hope. No future. Nothing for which to be grateful.

Gratitude, however, is an important part of most spiritual traditions and is one of the ethical precepts in yoga. Indeed, studies show that gratitude practices help you sleep better, improve mood disorders, and enhance your overall health. Finding gratitude in life's challenges can turn negative thoughts to positive ones, can help you weather life's storms from a place of equanimity. Hmmm. This sounds perfect for our homeless women. It was a revelation for me to face the fact that I always end my regular yoga classes with a meditation on gratitude, but never do this at YogaHome. To ask people who have nothing to be grateful for to reflect on gratitude seemed like a cruel mockery of reality. But surely gratitude is not the purview only of those with abundance. I asked myself: Is there a way for those who have little, nevertheless, to find small blessings in their lives, which may turn their thoughts from negative to positive, giving them even brief moments of relief from want, fear, and depression? I resolved to see what we could do.

As I drove into the parking lot at the shelter for the first class after Thanksgiving I thought about whether I could bring up the topic of gratitude without seeming condescending. I had a moment of panic and thought I cannot do this. In a flash, I realized the barrier was within me.

Jenny and I had talked this over, so Jenny, with her greater group facilitation skills helped me bring this up. We asked what our participants did for Thanksgiving. Then we asked if anyone would like to share something about which they are grateful? Without a moment's hesitation they began to call out their gratitudes – “I'm grateful I got away from my boyfriend without being hurt, I'm grateful for another resident who helped me, I'm grateful I have a roof over my head, I'm grateful I am alive.” These comments were powerful and heart-felt. I realized that having suffered, gratitude is so much deeper than what most of us with our middle-class lives

have experienced. A bond of sharing in the class was created by this discussion which lit up the room. It was the best class ever.

At class the following week, one lady, present the previous week, said eagerly, "Can we tell our gratuities again?" Once again people called out their gratuities. "I have been clean for two months, I have been clean for two years, I am beginning to deal with my anxiety, I lost my baby girl last year and I am grateful I am now pregnant with another baby girl." They wanted to talk about these things. We cheered and applauded their successes. Now we always start class this way. Several of them say they are grateful for yoga class.

I felt profoundly changed. I had made an assumption about gratitude, looking at the world through my eyes, not theirs, and I had indeed robbed them of a wonderful opportunity. I was deeply, deeply humbled.

Lessons Learned

Jean: I have learned some profound lessons about gratitude. Gratitude lies within everyone as a universal trait. Gratitude makes us feel good. It helps us step back and witness our lives. It is a positive thought, focusing on something good, not something bad. It is relative and can be adapted to any situation. If you have no home, you can be grateful for the shelter's roof over your head. If you have no healthy relationship, you can be grateful that you got out of a bad one. You can be grateful for every day you were not enslaved by drugs or alcohol. It is a useful tool in any group for enhancing self-esteem.

Jenny: Gratitude can be found in simple, everyday things we take for granted. Last Christmas, we gave away fuzzy socks at the end of a group session. Who doesn't like those kinds of socks? What woman doesn't own at least one pair of them? They are pure comfort and indulgence. What we were not prepared for was the gratitude shown to us for giving the socks. Since that day a year ago, we have ended each group session by giving a pair of socks to each participant. People still line up to get them, selecting their choice for the day with the utmost of care. Some of my social work clients have contributed socks and hand-knitted caps for the participants and Jean's yoga students have donated socks and gloves as well.

Jean and Jenny: As we reflect on life in the shelter, we now see things every week for which to be grateful. We see the resilience of the human spirit, the indomitable will to form meaningful relationships out of groups of strangers, of aid and comfort being given to those in need, of deep grief when a fellow resident dies. We see people seeking a greater quiet and peace by coming to yoga class, along with the courage to try something new and unfamiliar. We hear sighs of pleasure when tension leaves tight shoulders. When we watch these women interact with us as facilitators and with each other, there is no difference between them and us. They soldier on in the face of adversity, make friendships, they laugh and cry, they get angry and depressed and anxious, but so do we all.

Jenny: The real lesson for me is that as professionals we are trained to be non-judgmental, to treat our clients with compassion and caring, to welcome people with all their backgrounds, crises, and emotional and mental burdens. But as people, we bring to our work, our own backgrounds, beliefs, world views, and judgments. Buried in ourselves are assumptions we make about the experiences of others which guide our actions, no matter how hard we try. Those assumptions can limit our effectiveness in our chosen profession.

As a social worker trained to control my emotional reactions, YogaHome has filled me with both gratitude and humility. This group has taught me greater empathy and has allowed me to feel and express my emotions more freely. I am greatly humbled when I see and experience the courage and resilience of women who laugh, cry, yell, and love despite often dismal circumstances.

Jenny and Jean: We have learned to recognize appreciation when we see a former prostitute show the sweetest compassion to another resident who is crying. We rejoice with the two women who proudly show us the engagement rings they have given each other. We understand the depth of friendship when we see a woman break down in uncontrollable sobs when a friend she has grown close to in the shelter is placed and leaves the shelter. We join residents in cheering and celebrating with someone who has found a place to live.

What started out to be a six-week commitment has

turned into 16 months and we have no plans to stop. We have changed professionally and personally. This experience has led us to be much more aware and alert for our limiting beliefs and we are deeply humbled by what we have been taught by the women in the homeless shelter. What started as a desire to help and empower has become a personal journey for us, exploring our own sense of humility and gratitude as we unroll our mats, engage the group, and remain forever grateful for this experience.

About the Authors: Jennifer Davis-Berman, Ph.D. is Professor of Social Work at the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio (937-426-1306; jdavisberman1@udayton.edu); Jean Farkas is a certified yoga instructor and President of Bridge to Health Ohio (937-657-5992; farkasjean@aol.com).