

# YOGI WRITINGS: Touching My Toes

## George Pilling

Photos by Kathy Prekoski

I can't touch my toes. This is no surprise to people who know me. I often ask for help in scratching that itchy spot on my own back. Some mornings I can't even tie my own shoes. When I am on the way to the gym to get "strong" and "fit," I need to be able to get my sneakers on. And since I go early in the morning when my body is at its stiffest, this can be a problem.



My back "goes out." Sometimes I wish it would go out without me – maybe go and loosen up a bit. (I recommend Jim Beam on the rocks.) When my back goes out it affects my quality of life drastically. I can't straighten up. Sometimes it's hard to walk. Sometimes it's hard to sit down. I don't have fun hiking or fishing. I sit around moping. An orthopedic surgeon once told me that there was nothing I can do about it – it's just the way my back is built.

Yoga is the obvious thing to try both for my back and my untied shoes. Flexibility and core strength. Controlled twisting and stretching. "OK, I'll try," I said about a year ago. Susan Graves told me about Brenda – and held my hand (figuratively) as I entered the studio. Inside were other friends. And a few men. Not everyone was slim and fit. This was looking good. Brenda led us gently through our paces. It was easy – stretchy but easy. The hour and a half dragged on. I almost fell asleep while waiting for things to happen. Later I learned that the first of the month is restorative day. It's not really my style; I prefer more activity.

I came back a week later. It was harder. Brenda led us through several moves with the Sanskrit names like "pullyourhipsoutofjointina" and "fallonyerassina." I heard some grunting from the corners. I thought it was a women's tennis match.

No, it was the men. People like me. All of them in the back of the room, grunting. If I were worried about male image in the Valley Yoga classes, I would have been embarrassed. Brenda – she was impressive. She's incredibly fit, all muscle but not muscle-bound. Her sense of balance shows in yoga positions and in how she deals with her students. She's kind. She tells me I am getting better at the positions, even though I can't tell. My muscles – oh heck, my skeleton, responds. Sometimes it's hard to walk after class. After that second class I moved to the back of the room and I started grunting. Whatever works. Now I go on the Wednesdays that aren't sleepy time days (restorative) and on Saturdays when I can.

I am learning interesting things. I have a Psoas Muscle that attaches my hips to my spine. It's nice to know they are attached. I can lift my Navicular Bone when Brenda tells me to. Since I have had flat feet all my life, this is nice to know. Lift it and I have an arch! The muscles I knew I had are teaching me new things, too. My deltoids can be as sore after yoga as they are after lifting weights. These are important for me because they are a major part of my fishing muscle complex – the set of muscles that allow me to cast a fly with precision to feeding trout. Mostly I am learning that

bending, twisting, flexing, stretching and balance are more important than muscle mass in gauging fitness.

Yoga may also help me with other kinds of stiffness and balance. I have been married to Carol for 14 years. She is supportive of me and tolerant of my personality traits, one of which is my tendency to tell it the way I see it, not taking into account the way she may see the same series of events.

On my mirror over my bureau I have a cartoon. Two guys sitting in a bar. One turns to the other and says, "My wife left me for a guy who isn't right all the time." Since this is true of me and my first wife, I need to be aware of and reduce the stiffness in my mind, which feeds the stiffness in my body while the stiffness and lack of balance in my muscles contributes to my rigid thinking. Yoga is a mind-body experience. Even touching my toes takes believing that I can do it someday. And, hey – things are better. Now I can reach my ankles.

