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Experiencing religion – or spirituality-inside the yoga studio

By JAMES WALL

Its 8:15 on a Monday evening — a time when I'm usually heading to bed to do some reading after enduring the first day of a brain-sapping work week.

Tonight, my friend Sherif Sakr, successful real estate entrepreneur, Egyptian-American and enigmatic yoga teacher, has summoned me to his yoga class at CorePower Yoga at Happy Canyon and Hampden in Cherry Hills. I'll be honest, I really don't want to go. Yes, I'm an enthusiastic and experienced yogi, practicing almost daily for 12 years, but 8:15 in the evening? C'mon, man!

Sherif discovered yoga in 2006 and was soon hooked.

Two years ago he embarked on teacher training and hasn't looked back — he's quickly become one of the most popular teachers of CorePower's upbeat, cardiovascular challenging version of power yoga.

But Sherif has taken CorePower's standard fare and turned it on its head, creating a devoted following of mostly women in their 20s and early 30s who religiously turn up to his Monday night class and rave about it. As one young yogini told



Sherif Sakr

me before we entered class, "Man, you're in for a treat."

The yoga room is dark as I enter, with a continual mystical "aum" sound emanating from the music system. Candles around the room provide some light so that I can find a place for my mat, bumping into a few Lululemon-clad young ladies on the way. There is an atmosphere of expectancy, a palpable buzz of anticipation. The room is hot — to facilitate sweating during the yoga practice, and most people are in child's pose or lying on their backs in anticipation of a tough workout. Pretty soon, the yoga room is full to the

brim.

As Sherif walks in and emits a cheerful, "How are you all tonight, yogis?" various people muffle "great" and there are giggles from some corners. And then comes the evening's theme.

"We're going to deal with transformation tonight," Sherif announces. "I want you to feel transformed through this powerful practice of yoga. Yoga has the power to transform your life

in every way: your work, your relationships, your friendships, your finances — everything.”

Sherif expounds upon this theme for a while longer and then goes silent. Within a few seconds a haunting mezzo-soprano voice starts singing a version of a popular song as the singer strolls around the room. As she walks past me, I notice a huge string of mala beads around her neck that she cradles as she sings. “This is different,” I think to myself, somewhat skeptically, but very much intrigued.

As the song fades, we chant five “aums” — the vibration of the universe according to yogic theory — and the physical yoga begins. It’s fairly standard power yoga interspersed with Sherif’s novel additions: an aum or two in crescent lunge, some tensing of the lower core of the body known in yoga as “uddiyana bandha,” plus an encouragement for everyone to sing along to the song “Love is My Religion” by Ziggy Marley, while lying prone in half-pigeon pose. Most people are unafraid to do so. I even hum along despite my typical Englishman’s reticence.

Intermittently, Sherif raises his voice and cajoles his audience to feel transformation in their bodies, minds and spirit as the yoga flows. The energy is tangible as these yogis are not in the least skeptical. They have faith in the message. I am in the midst of the “born-again-yogi” crowd.

As the yoga slows and we eventually end up in a guided relaxing savasana (“corpse pose” — lying still on your back), the singer, Giovanna Henery, strikes up “Amazing Grace” as some yogis join in. As she ends, Sherif closes with a short blessing, ending with the traditional yogic salutation, “namaste.” Dripping sweat and seemingly exalted, yogis exit slowly and in silence. A sense of what could be deemed a “religious experience” remains in the air.

When I speak with participants afterwards, most do not identify themselves as religious. But all say that the class was “a spiritual experience.” Andy Richardson, a man in his late forties and an oddity in this class of 20-somethings, says he’d cried in the class before and singer Giovanna Henery says she had found herself in tears more than once.

The boom of yoga in this country over the last 15 years has firmly established this Indian import within the pantheon of spiritual practice — in spite of and perhaps because it espouses no real dogma or injunctions as to how to lead one’s life.

Critics may call it narcissistic. Nadia Bolz-Weber, postmodern Lutheran pastor and poster child for the “emerging church” in America, says: “Would your yoga teacher visit you in hospital or bring a meal and words of comfort when a close relative dies? You need a church or synagogue and not just a for-profit yoga studio to get real religion.”

In the meantime, members of Generation Y are getting their spiritual kicks in greater numbers in sweaty yoga studios across America. Sherif’s particular brand will soon be even more accessible to his followers as he has plans to open his own studio in the Denver Tech Center in Marina Square in early November.

More interestingly, George Karl, coach of the Denver Nuggets, is a financial partner and big supporter. Plans are in play for Sherif’s new ONE Yoga to offer classes aimed at cancer sufferers and survivors, a passion for Karl who has survived cancer twice and who has witnessed a son also fight and survive the disease.

My guess is: The new studio will be a big success.