

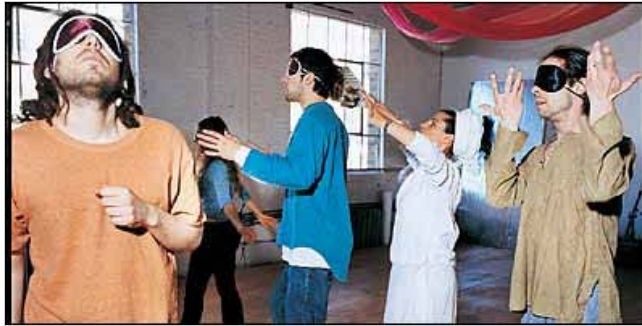
FEATURE

God Is in the Deltoids

A new wave of fitness gurus is merging religion and exercise.

By Sarah Bernard | Published May 21, 2005

Add a Comment



Parashakti Bat-Haim leads a Shamanic Earth Dance ceremony. (Photo: Tatiana Kronberg)

On a Tuesday evening in a dance studio on the fourth floor of the Spirit club, a “mind-body-soul” center in West Chelsea, a crowd of 90 women in belly-baring tank tops and yoga pants and men in baggy T-shirts and running shorts ready themselves for a workout. Some stretch their hamstrings, others mark their territory on the studio floor with water bottles. Everyone is barefoot, including the instructor, Jonathan Horan, 34, who looks every bit the tanned and fit surf bum he once was. “Hello, my loves!” he says as he begins the warm-up, setting the mood with Sarah McLachlan’s “Fumbling Towards Ecstasy” and encouraging his students to “move with the breath.” Some of his charges trace the perimeter of the room; others sway in place while taking deep, sinus-clearing inhales and exhales. After fifteen minutes, Horan gives them a new task—and this is where things get weird. It’s not knee bends or ab crunches or biceps curls he exhorts them to try. Instead, he tells them to pray:

ADVERTISEMENT

THE CURRENT ISSUE



SUBSCRIBE TO NEW YORK

VIEW CONTENTS | ORDER ISSUE | COVER GALLERY | CUSTOMER SERVICE

"Maybe it's a prayer for your family, or a friend," he says. "Or maybe it's a prayer for yourself—that the outside is a better reflection of the inside."

In the nineties, the yoga craze introduced New York's fitnesscenti to the notion of mixing two practices that, to the Western mind at least, didn't seem to go together: spirituality and exercise. Suddenly there was an alternative to pounding away vacantly on the StairMaster or running in circles in Central Park, one that whipped you into shape and reduced stress, yes, but also—bonus!—helped you merge with the universe. Now, after every permutation of yoga has been marketed, from Hot to Power to Disco, a new breed of fitness gurus—call them post-yogis—is taking the spirituality-and-fitness movement to the next logical step. They're introducing classes that blend exercise with religious faiths from Judaism to Christianity to Native American shamanism to all-purpose "spirituality."

The classes don't make up a unified movement so much as an accidental subculture of loosely knit groups. Horan's High Vibration Wave sessions mix a New Age vibe with vaguely Christian elements. Ari Weller, a personal trainer who grew up in a Conservative Jewish family, and Jay Michaelson, an Internet entrepreneur and Jewish scholar, lead a class called (*ahem*) Embodied Judaism. Rabbi and karate black belt Niles Goldstein takes students on outdoor-adventure excursions he dubs Outward Bound for the Soul. Parashakti Bat-Haim, a former modern dancer who has studied with Native American elders, offers something called Shamanic Earth Dance ceremonies. Even mainstream health clubs like Crunch are finding religion. Crunch offers Liquid Strength, a Zen-minded class, and it plans to introduce Gospel Aerobics in the fall.

This isn't a Jazzercise-level craze—at least not yet—but interest does seem to be growing. Horan's class, in its original space at the Children's Aid Society on Sullivan Street, became so popular that neighbors complained about the noise and forced him to relocate. Weller and Michaelson, Goldstein, and Bat-Haim have all increased the number of sessions they offer or seen a rise in the number of students who attend their groups, and since 9/11, the number of spiritually related classes at Crunch, says fitness director Donna Cyrus, has increased by one-third.

Fitness-mad New Yorkers are always looking for the next new workout, of course, and in the age of multitasking, it never hurts to tick off two things at once. But the post-yogis insist something deeper is also at work. "A lot of us feel the spirit of organized religion has been lost," says Horan, "so we're searching for spirituality in different ways." Cyrus simply puts it this way: "It's like gyms have become the new churches." Here, a guide to the new fitness temples.

High Vibration Wave

The instructor Jonathan Horan is a former child actor and adventure-sports junkie with the broad shoulders of Ben Affleck and the manic energy of Jack Black. He started teaching the Wave, a dance-based class, in his twenties, but didn't realize it was his calling until he dislocated his knee in Snowbird, Utah. "It was a big mortality check," says Horan, who grew up half-Catholic and half-Jewish, practicing neither. "It's a cruel world out there, and this work feeds my faith in humanity. My dance is my connection to the divine."

Where it meets In addition to his sessions at the Spirit club (Tuesday nights from 7:30 to 9:30; \$15), Horan leads monthly Wave workshops at Exhale, on Central Park South (dates vary; \$20). 212-760-1381 or ravenrecording.com.

Religious affiliation/philosophy New Agey with occasional Christian undertones. The Wave was invented by Horan's mother, Gabrielle Roth, a revered wellness-movement figure. Her book *Sweat Your Prayers: Movement as Spiritual Practice* outlines the philosophy of freestyle dancing according to five different "rhythms," or states of being—flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical, and stillness—which make up the Wave. The goal, says Horan, is to focus on the dancing to "tap into the divine" and "release the chatter in your head."

What it looks like Somewhere between a Baptist revival and a rave. Regulars refer to themselves as "The Tribe" and volunteer to assist Horan like dutiful altar boys. On one recent evening, they helped construct the class "installation," a small shrine made of flow drapes, votive candles, and a card with a quote from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas: "If you bring forth what is in you, what you bring forth will save you / If you do not bring forth what is in you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." (On other occasions, the installation has featured rosaries, Buddhist statues, and goldfish.) After a quick warm-up, Horan starts to call out the rhythms. The one inviolate commandment, he informs newcomers, is don't stop moving. "Even if you need a drink of water," he says, "dance over to get it." Unself-conscious types thrash around with abandon like Janis Joplin; more mellow souls sway slowly from side to side. One especially free spirit buzzes through the forest of bodies like some New Age Tasmanian Devil. Just when all the activity has made the studio nice and sticky, Horan pauses the music and calls his denizens to the shrine for a sermon. He asks them to consider how they dance in class. Are they shy? Afraid of their bodies? Judgmental toward others? The unspoken questions: What can that teach you about yourself? How can that help you grow? When he talks about a recent workshop he attended, he drops his voice to a whisper. He was so exhausted, he says, he could hardly move, so he decided there was nothing left to do but dance with God. "I just relaaaaaxed," he says, opening his arms and letting his head fall back. It worked—he finished the workout with renewed vigor. "Maybe I was dancing with God," he says. "Maybe I wasn't." Rapt students nod. Instead of *Amens*, there are deep sighs of recognition—and a few tears.

Physical benefit For slow dancers, the workout is modest. But for motivated types, it's apparently considerable. "My abs are

Subscribe

Give a Gift

CONTINUE ▶

ADVERTISEMENT

tight," says Roger Kuhn, a musician, seminary student, and member of the Tribe. "And I have the best legs of anybody I know."

Start the Discussion - [Add a Comment](#)

Share this story... [f](#) [t](#) [+](#) [Share](#) [E-mail](#) [Print](#)



How the Birth-Control Pill Changed the World

DAILY Intelligencer

Groupon Reportedly Not Taking Google's Six Billion Dollars

Medical Marijuana Could Hit the Streets of New Jersey by Spring

Mark Zuckerberg Channels Don Draper



Why Are We in Afghanistan?



Making Money Off of Distressed Celebrities



TSA's New Screening Policies Aren't Safer

▼ ADVERTISEMENT ▼

MORE FLIGHTS. MORE DESTINATIONS.
MORE WORK TO BE DONE.

KEEP CLIMBING
DELTA

[WATCH NOW >](#)

GET 8 FREE ISSUES!

[CLICK HERE](#)

Copyright © 2010, New York Media LLC. All Rights Reserved.

[New York Magazine](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms](#) | [Magazine Customer Service](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [RSS](#) RSS Feeds