

Autobiography of An Aerobics Instructor



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MINDFUL MOVEMENT

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Humdrum....the one word that described my upbringing. My parents, two siblings and I lived in a cul-de-sac neighborhood development, in a cheaply made raised ranch built in the 70's. The footprint of our house was identical to ten others on our block and had low ceilings, thin doors and when you flushed the toilet, pipes that howled through the walls. My childhood took place in that cookie-cutter house outside of Syracuse New York in a little town called Manlius. It snowed a lot.

I was born in 1971, the same year cigarette advertising ended on TV. I was not a breast fed baby but in my mother's defense, the leading pediatrician at the time, Doctor Spock, told mothers across America to feed their babies formula. Breast milk was apparently dirty.

So it should come as no surprise, the microwave was the most heavily used appliance in my childhood home. Everything came out of the microwave - popcorn, TV dinners, brownie mix. I ate microwaved hot dogs, and when I drank Swiss Miss hot chocolate from the 10 calorie sugar-free packets, the water was nuked in - you guessed it - the microwave.

While we were technically Catholic and went to church every Sunday, God was never discussed. Words never spoken in my house included angel, soul, spirit, karma, heaven, and, of course, God. We didn't pray or meditate or have any inkling of spiritual awareness. We also showed minimal affection towards each other. We didn't say "I love you" when departing for the day or snuggle up on the sofa. In fact, my mother and father did not sleep in the same bed, and as a kid, I never saw them be loving towards each other. This lack of spirituality and the lack of affection are the worst kind of lack I think because it is felt as a love deficit. My brother, sister, and I felt it.

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I was a very dense, chunky baby with a Godzilla vibe, knocking things over with each earthquaking footstep. I grew into a sturdy toddler with legs like tree stumps, and then into a robust kid with thick curly hair and overwhelming freckles. I was anti-frail.

My older sister, Sally, who was born a preemie, was actually frail with allergies and asthma - forever stuffing tissues up her sleeves. Today we are friends, but then, she was my childhood foe. She called my freckles "blotches" and never missed an opportunity to tease me. She'd pretend to count them, pointing at my face and saying, "1, 2, 3, 4, 1 million, INFINITY..."

On a regular basis, she'd refer to me as Ugly. "Hey, Ugly", "Good morning, Ugly", "Ew, your freckles are so gross!" Clearly, Sally did not have my back, and she did not enjoy having me as a little sister. She policed me, ratted me out, and was bothered by my presence. I was innately good at sports and very brave when it came to climbing trees and inner tubing down the creek, where she was insecure, physically fragile, uncoordinated and nervous.

Let it be known - the real bullies of the world, are actually the weak ones. The strong people leave others alone.

By the time I was 10, I had a real complex about my freckles. While everyone else has a cute dusting of dots across their noses, I was coated all over - my neck, shoulders, forehead - in an unorganized pattern. My freckles "ran into" each other. I was sure nobody had freckles like me and that I was deformed.

One day, I stole quarters from the top of my Dad's dresser, rode my bike to Harvey's Drugs, and bought Cover Girl foundation. I proceeded to generously apply it to my face, really hopeful about this as a solution. Later that same day, while looking at my reflection in the rear view mirror on the passenger side of my mother's station wagon - the midday sun shining strongly - my hope crashed. Devastatingly, the freckles still showed through.

My "freckle problem" turned positive with an epiphany, and I think angels have something to do with my attitude shift. I realized the freckles were here to stay, and showed no irritation while under attack by my sister's mean tongue. I also vowed to never speak ill of them to myself. After so much effort trying to erase them, over night I came to the conclusion these brown dots made me special. My one and only hang up about my self was over in the snap of my finger. And, once my sister's words held no power, she stopped antagonizing me.

This kind of "mind play" comes in handy, friends! I've used it many times in my life and most recently with my natural hair color. I stopped dying my hair and became a grey haired woman at age 48. After covering my grey roots for years, I said to myself, "You know what Ellen, grey is an awesome color and God doesn't make mistakes." Voila. Just like my freckles, in a snap, the hang up was gone. Nobody gives me flack about my hair. I accept it and everyone around me accepts it because I accept it!

Self-acceptance is a cornerstone to wellness.

Around age 12, I discovered aerobics and its unofficial “anything is possible” mantra. Little did I know at the time, it would spawn a lifelong passion I’d never tire of - movement. Aerobics was a healthy disco, shiny outfits et al. To this day, if I hear the song “Funkytown” I think, shuffle to the right, swing kick four times, shuffle left, hop hop clap and march left lead. The music was THE BEST. Hot Stuff. Gloria. Strut. Walking On Sunshine. Love Shack. Let it be known that this was 1983 and aerobics was done barefoot.

There was a unique cast of characters in that aerobics room too. The tall skinny flamboyant guy, who helped with sound when there was a technical difficulty. The beauty pageant lady oozing with femininity, who often turned into an instructor. (She was also a member of Junior League). The gym rat who knew everybody and couldn’t get enough sweat, and the single folks looking for love, avoiding going home to empty apartments. I would take every single class I could - sometimes doing a double. My only hurdle was, I needed a ride to the gym. My mom was very supportive of this and she drove me to the gym. I owe her a lot for that.

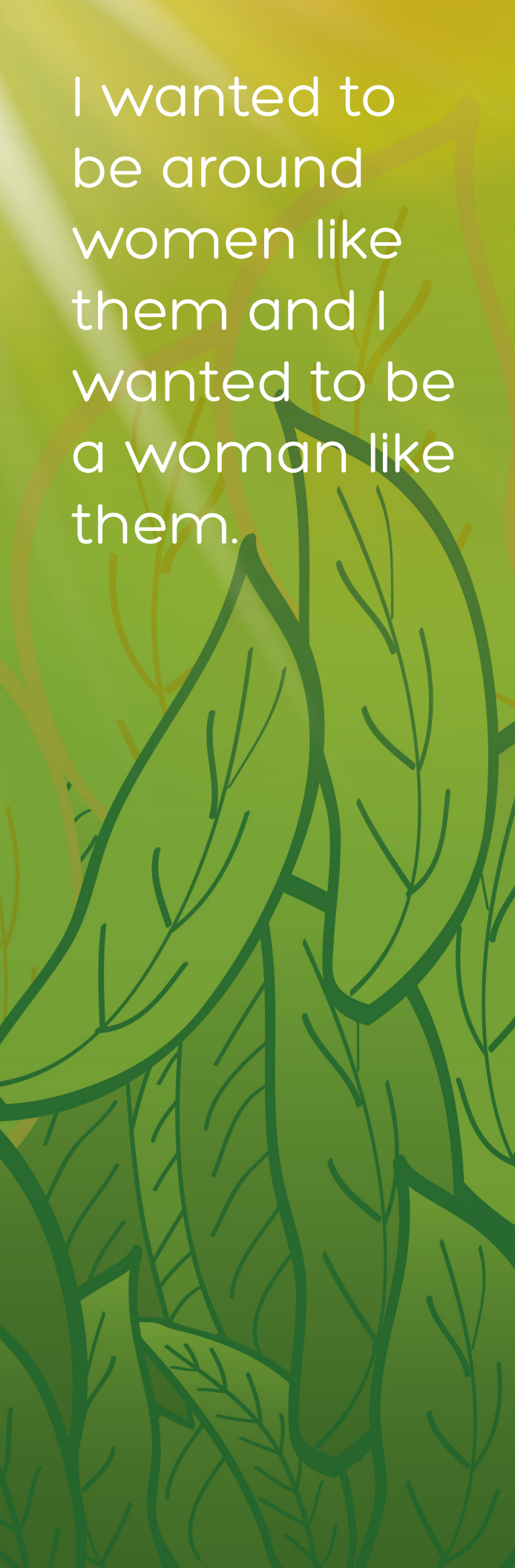
I carried the printed aerobics schedule around with me, folded up in a square and referred to a few times each day. Some kids stared at Rick Springfield records or Seventeen Magazine covers, for me it was the “Sundown Dewitt” and “K Aerobics” aerobics schedules. Joan was teaching Monday at 5. I also collected aerobic schedules from other places. Clearly, I was hooked. It was aerobics worship. That studio was my church. No one - not my mother or myself - would have ever believed the importance this window of time was for me, but as the saying goes...find out what someone loves and you’ll find out who they are.



The winter of my 12th year was a big one. Besides an introduction to aerobics, I got my first period. It was pain like I'd never felt before. My belly crushed in a vice, my kidneys exploded through my back. I was feverish and nauseous. I couldn't stand up straight, hunched over like someone with a gunshot wound. As Day One progressed, the pain progressed, culminating in profuse sweat (while shivering), dry heaving then puking and, finally, passing out. If I was lucky, I was home in bed for the Day One finale. When I'd awoken a few hours later with most of the pain having subsided, I was on my knees, thanking God. The very first time this happened, I thought it was a fluke. One and done. Much to my dismay, I would experience this agony on repeat, every 28 days.

I told no one, but whenever I interacted with adult females, I'd stop and think, "Do they survive that pain too?" When I saw Wonder Woman on TV, I'd think, "When does she get her period?" The Pamprin commercials showed women with headaches and cramps, but those were "easy" symptoms - I had a full body assault. Up until this point in my life, I had literally never been sick or injured. I was stung by a bee once, so I was new to pain and new to debilitation.

I did steal a Pamprin once from my neighbors medicine cabinet, and not a single ounce of pain subsided. In fact, I puked the pill up. In college I would try a prescription high dose ibuprofen given to me by a roommate, and puked that pill up too. (I'm very leery of pharmaceuticals, by the way). I suffered in complete silence, and even my mother seemed to not know. I thought it was just what women had to go through - in hiding.



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The only place I sought guidance was at the my local public library. I remember walking the aisles, strolling passed American History and Gardening and discovering a section called Women's Health. This was the 80's and the Internet didn't exist, so I sat in a chair at the end of a long bookshelf, leafing through the pages of hardcover books. I saw diagrams of the fallopian tubes and charts of menstrual phases, all of which was very interesting. I read about puberty, childbirth and menopause, but nothing specifically on period pain, which was more confirmation it wasn't a real problem. I left the library with a drawn conclusion - a day of excruciating pain each month was just my plight as a woman. (Eventually, at around age 30, I will resolve my painful period issue through diet, lifestyle changes and herbal medicine.)

But I didn't leave the Manlius Public Library empty handed. I checked out a Jane Fonda Workout album, and had 14 whole days to "absorb" every beat. Obtaining this record got me actually doing aerobics at home, so when I couldn't get a ride to the gym, I could still take class. I'd repeatedly check this album out, practically "owning" it for a good portion of a year.

Whenever I could though, I took class. Francie, Joan, Kathy, and Debbie were my favorite instructors. I idolized them all, with their fit bodies, vibrant energy, and their happiness. Maybe they were acting a little, but I didn't care. I wanted to be around women like them and I wanted to be a woman like them. (I was sure they didn't have a love deficit at their house!).

The energy in the aerobics room was an about face from the energy at home. While my household seemed somber, the aerobics room with its neon "Let's Move!" sign was joyful. No one smiled or laughed on Calvary Circle, but in the aerobics room, a good time was had by all. I felt this juxtaposition deeply, and absorbed every ounce of inspiration from that aerobics room, carrying the spark with me as I returned back home to blah.

All through high school, I obsessed over aerobics. College at The University Of Connecticut was my next stop, and I immediately started teaching aerobics on campus. I taught Mondays, Wednesdays & Fridays at noon at Hawley Armory and I cared more about teaching those three classes than I did about my college courses, and that's the complete truth. I graduated from UCONN with a degree in communications, but my sights were set on movement.

For the 10 years following college I was a gypsy in a whirlwind. I taught aerobics at Club Med In Port St. Lucie, Florida and Paradise Island, Bahamas. I then taught in New York City (at New York Health & Racket). Then it was back to Syracuse, where I taught at Gold's Gym and Champion's Fitness while getting my master's degree in Education. I then moved to Los Angeles and taught at LA Fitness, Bodies In Motion and then my big break - CRUNCH Hollywood. I trained clients and I program directed and I taught instructor training workshops. I kept moving and teaching and saying yes yes yes to opportunities. I didn't make much, but I thought I was so rich. Working was not work, and I felt love in abundance because of it.

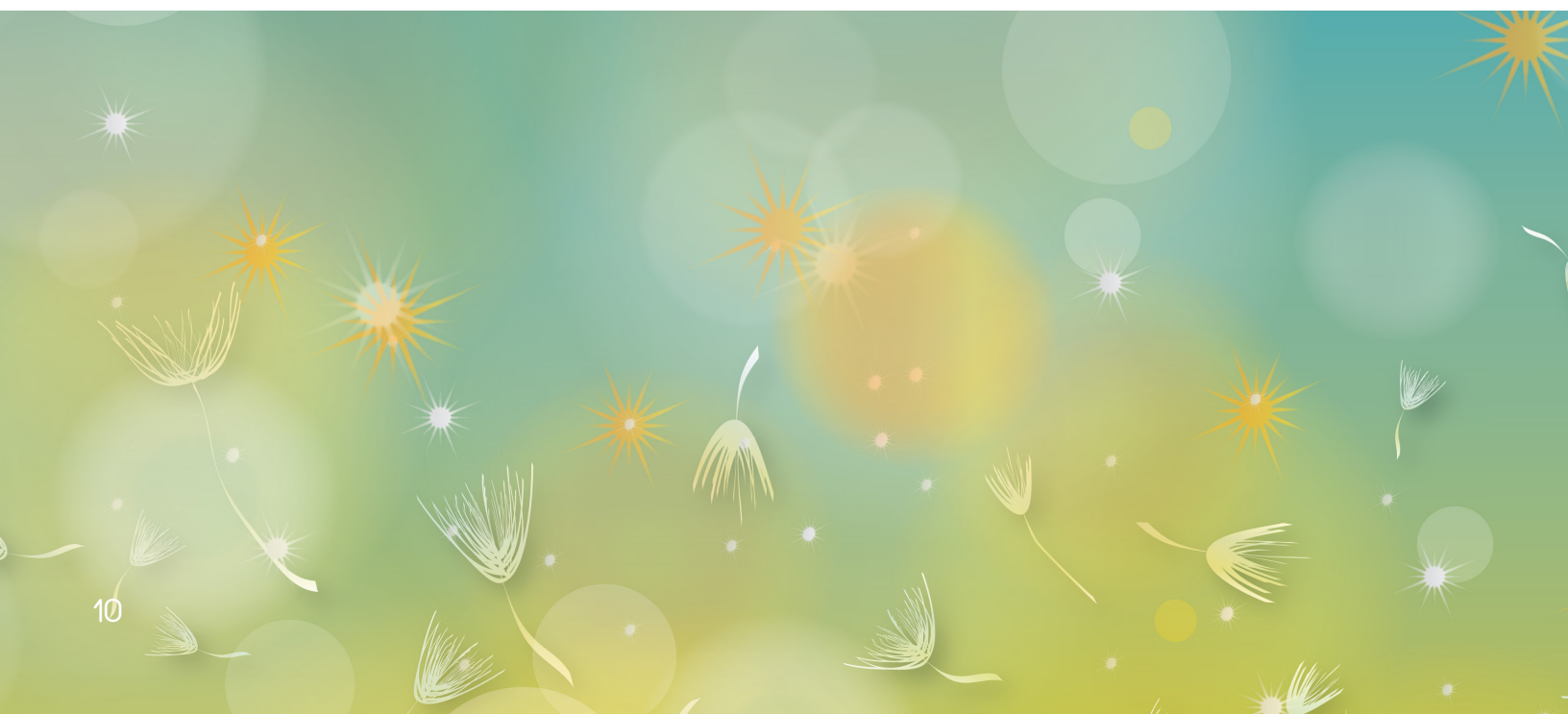
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Basically, once I began teaching aerobics at age 18, I never stopped. I could not shake my movement mania. I realize that this makes me a little weird. Most people do not loovvee exercise. Many times my family members encouraged me to “get a real job” and to this day they are stumped at how I’ve carved out a career.

In my twenties and thirties, I’d say yes to everything. Sure I’ll sub that class. Sure, I’ll train your daughter. Count me in for water aerobics! Saying yes expanded my comfort zone to the point where it’s hard for me to be uncomfortable. When it came time for me to do on-camera work, I was prepared.

Through it all, I stayed open to everything. Aerobics is my foundation, but movement at large is what thrills me. I took Ballet class and honed in on the importance of body awareness. I obtained certifications in yoga and Pilates, and then Reiki and holistic nutrition. I study astrology and crystal healing. I even took a cadaver anatomy class (which I could not do twice!).

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Bare feet. Breath. Movement.

Today, when I go for a massage, I am on the table talking a lot, asking the therapist about his/her career and what they think is so powerful about massage. (It can definitely be annoying). Breath work classes and meditation methods are thrilling me at the moment, and I feel that the older I get, the better I get, because I keep bringing more and more to the table. Pregnancy, motherhood, and aging are all great gifts because they are great teachers.

I'm labeled as a yoga instructor or a Pilates specialist but what I really am is inclusive. I love it all and I "pull" from the best from everything - even weight lifting and martial arts. There are only three absolutes to all of my workouts:

1. They are barefoot
2. There is a focus on breathing
3. They showcase big ranges of motion

My three absolutes make movement more potent, safer and more likely to invigorate. When anyone asks me where I got the idea for going barefoot I responded, where did you get the idea of putting on shoes? As for breath - do you know you can change your physical, mental and spiritual state with breath alone? And when it comes to big ranges of motion, I get very snarky saying, "I don't want to spend my day in the space of a coffin!"

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Stay open. Evolve.

But I'm not Done Yet Ladies...

After working with so many women over the years I learned that my dysfunctional menstrual health was (sadly) standard. Every woman I ever trained has had issues, from fibroids to infertility, to cysts or PMS. I'm not exaggerating. Every. Single. Woman. My period pain sent me on a 20 year quest for healing, privately. (You should see my bookshelf - it is filled with obscure books from 17th century midwifery to Atlantis Secrets of Healing). I share my discoveries in The 28 Days Lighter Diet (Skirt!, 2014), a book I co-wrote with Kate Hanley, that helps women release weight and end PMS by tuning into their cycles. Yes, fitness and diet are life-changing, but even more significant is honoring the menstrual cycle. Ladies, the moon and the seasons and the cycle of life, month after month, is within us. Let's acknowledge, celebrate, and be guided by this gift. (Another chance to feel love abundance).

Modern living teaches us to ignore cycles. It teaches us to override nature in general, unless there's a tsunami. This disconnect is preventing us from experiencing true health. Citizens of the modern world are trained to act like everyday is the same, which is not true. Our energies ebb and flow all month long and require us to adjust our actions accordingly. It's a subtle form of self-harm to deny this phenomena. It's also a missed opportunity.

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Syncing up with nature & our own inner guidance is the key to true health.

How can we sync up? Go within.

So much of our attention is without...the billboards, the text messages, the phone calls. We are pulled away from ourselves most of the day in modern life. It's not just our womanly cycles we are ignorant of, it's everything. It's our breathe, our tension, our imbalances, our strengths and weaknesses, even our emotions. We spend most of our time out of body.

Dare I say, much of modern life is an outer body experience?

As cheesy as it sounds (and I know it sounds cheesy), when we go within, we become our own guru. We feel. We notice. We know what is right for us and we move towards it. Our very own personalized map to feeling good gets laid out before us. After all of the exercise I've done in my life, I've come to understand that along with meditation, there's a certain kind of exercise that turns our gaze inward. This type of exercise leads to confidence, body awareness, higher vibration and every ingredient needed for empowered wellness. It's a type of exercise that I look forward to doing. I call it mindful movement. Did you know you can learn yourself and generate inspiration when you exercise? (More abundance again...)



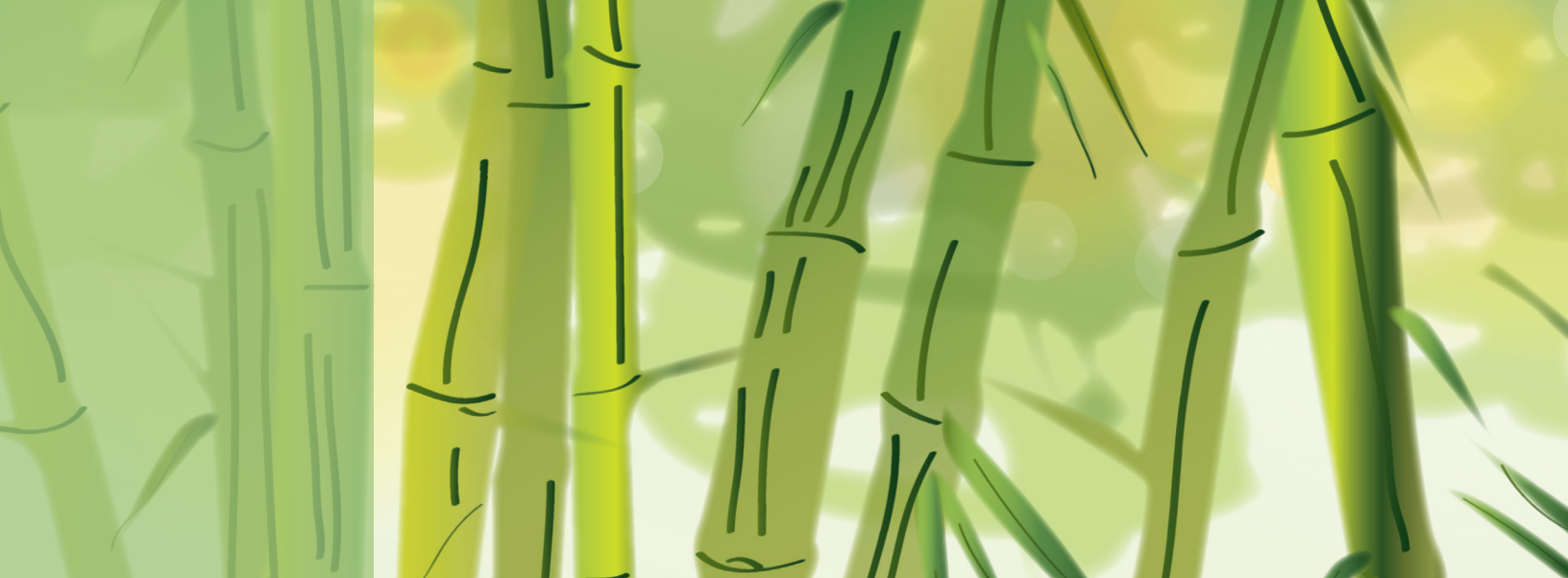
High Vibration Life.

The 12 year old Ellen who snuck into aerobics classes tapped into mindful movement way back when. My theory is that the original aerobics - at the very beginning, before it was commercialized - was a form of mindful movement. It was tapped into how you felt, lifted your spirit along with your heart rate, and created high vibrations. That was OG aerobics, and it was divine.

Aerobics morphed into "fitness" and lost its way by trying to top itself over and over again. Today's fitness trends love to confuse people with technical terms that nobody needs to know. Half the time they've made these terms up to sound cutting-edge! This industry has people doing everything to look good, but never directs attention to one's energy, and the miracle of the body goes unnoticed. What a crime!

I'm a mover and I've always been a mover, so I love the physical aspects and the science of exercise, but what has kept me going for so long - and what has led me to devote my life to movement - is the empowerment and inspiration it conjures up. Empowered Wellness is yours to be had. It's ours to be had. There's plenty to go around. (Psst...more abundance).

Now, to quote the pink neon sign hanging on the gym wall in 1983, "Let's Move!"



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