

# Chicken Wings for the Soul

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Why is it that so-called “spiritually awake” people are often the ones who trip, fall, and end up in the papers? Just this week I was reminded of the hubris of many so-called spiritual teachers who just don’t walk their talk...I went to my local Zen/yoga center where I’ve been practicing meditation and yoga for a couple of years only to discover that the feds had closed the place down. According to my yoga instructor, the owner (a yogi, meditation teacher and massage therapist) was arrested for “inappropriate behavior” with his clients. She didn’t know the details, but something fairly egregious must have happened in order for the FBI to get involved. My suspicion is that the massage component of the center was a cover-up for something with slightly less integrity. Oy, will we never learn.

Today, I want to write about spiritual hubris, or what my friend Judy, collaborator on my forthcoming book, **Shift It! Let Go of Fear and Get Your Life in Gear**, (yes, we are tinkering with the title!) likes to call, “ego masquerading as spirit”. All too often, it seems, we find ourselves engaged with spiritual teachers, friends and partners who somehow come to believe that once you’ve meditated for a few years, done lots of yoga, practice a healing technique, or become a therapist, that somehow you’re finished with your ego, and that base human behaviors or your almighty shadow (!) are a thing of the past. Think again.

One of the shadows of the New Age approach to spirituality seems to be that we come to believe that we can somehow transcend our humanity, to shed out base humanness. This is pure fantasy, of course. The deeper truth is that all the spiritual work in the world will not help you to stop burping or shitting or farting or reacting or raging or nagging or judging or any of the myriad *animal* behaviors that comprise the human BEING doing his or her thing in life. To my mind, the pay-off of real spiritual work is *integration*, not transcendence.

With this in mind, I want to share a personal story with you, a shadow story of sorts, one that won’t find itself in “Chicken Soul for the Soul” anytime soon, but nevertheless may offer its own gifts—of humility, humanity, and humble pie. I’m writing this today so that **I will remember it myself** the next time my ego tries to convince me that I’m “beyond that stuff”. Perhaps you’ll recognize yourself here, or someone you know, and take to heart the soul teaching in this rather mundane, but poignant “chicken wing” story.

This past Sunday night my partner and I hunkered down in front of the tube to watch a movie. We ordered in sushi (very New Yorker of us, no?) and also brought to dine some of the leftover fried chicken wings that we had stored up from the less healthy night out the night before (Saturday night indulgences). All relaxed, cozy and comfy, we drank wine, talked, and munched away. Towards the end of the meal, there was one chicken wing left on the plate. I reached for it and, about to take a bite and tear it apart, said something to the effect of, “don’t you want this last wing? If not, do you mind if I eat it?”

Of course, my teeth were already sinking in to the tasty flesh before my partner had mouthed his answer, which was, something like, “no, I was saving that piece to have for lunch tomorrow.” Oops, too late. I had taken the bite, eaten the poison, and ruined the evening.

As I recall, in response to my having taken the fatal bite out of his precious next-day repas, he rolled his eyes and sighed, becoming pretty pouty. Of course, I felt like a schmuck inside (guilt, guilt, guilt) but on the outside I said something sarcastic like, “well, why didn’t you say something before. I didn’t know it was that important to you. I thought we were sharing!” Now what actually happened in these heightened moments was probably quite different from what I am now recounting, but no matter. The upshot is that he was pouty and disappointed, and I was sulky and irritable. Yuck. We proceeded to both shut-down and sit in silence for a long time. Finally, I put down what was left of the chicken, told him coldly to take it home, and basically stewed in my reactivity. Yikes, where’s the punch line? Where was the fun, tickly, response that I could have chosen instead, one that would have lightened the air, affording us the chance to laugh at ourselves and our pettiness and dissolve the entire episode into giggles? Nowhere to be found. And what’s worse is that much later, when we were more ready to “process” what had happened, he calmly and succinctly told me that he thought that I’d been “more angry” in recent days than usual. Ouch. Me? Angry? I don’t think so. I’ve done my work, seen my therapist, chanted my mantras and stretched out upside down against the wall enough times to know: I am no longer angry! Ummmmm.

Jump tape to next day’s yoga class. The teacher is sharing with us the theme of the class: how to manage your resistance, your reactivity, and your impulse to flare up with negative energy if things don’t go your way, by staying centered, breathing deeply, and observing your mind’s tendency to react. In that grounded and aligned space of balance and openness, you have options. You can react; you can feel your reactions, then you can let it go. A fine teaching. We were to watch our bodies and see how our mind (our egos) sometimes reacts with judgment, criticism, even anger when the pose becomes too difficult or the instructions get too complex or come too quickly. (Reminded me of a time when one of my own yoga students at a retreat told me after a class that during “crow” pose he thought my voice reminded him of screeching chalk on a chalkboard...um, humbling.) Anyway, lo and behold, I didn’t even have to wait five seconds into our wonderful teacher’s directions before I had an opportunity to practice: my teacher was on the next mat.

Within six inches of me, gangly and unfettered by social grace, the guy on the mat next to mine proceeded to sweat, grunt, and move in every direction except the one being offered as an instruction. His energy was all over the place, his physicality was imposing and he was anything but grounded. During the class, no less than four times, he got up and left the room, stomping by me (in smelly socks, yikes!) with grunts and groans, muttering complaints about the class being too difficult. He had obviously had a bad day, and was committed to making sure that I would be joining him.

I just tried to focus, to breathe, to stay centered and unmoved by his presence. It worked, sort of. I got through the class without any major disruptions, but truth be told, by the end I was ready to throttle this guy. I knew in my heart that I should just “let it go” and relax, but the New Yorker in me was pissed: I had paid my money, I wanted my personal space to be inviolate; I wanted to be LEFT ALONE! Yikes. Where was my compassion for this guy? Well, the good news was that I did find a bit of loving energy in me towards the end. After all the stretching and breathing and centering—and attempting to stay inside rather than focus on him—I did feel a well of a giggle coming up through my throat as he fumbled to roll up his mat. And with the humor came the empathy and with the empathy came the compassion. I smiled sympathetically at him as we stood waiting to put away our mats, and lo and behold, he abruptly APOLOGIZED for disturbing my practice, saying that he had, in fact, had a bad day. I was bowled over, and awakened instantly to his humanity, and to mine. We wound up laughing together about the trials and tribulations of being a “spiritual” New Yorker...

The good news about me, for those of you who are now wondering whether I really should be practicing in a healing profession, is that I do not need three strikes on the head to get the message—two good blows to my ego are usually enough. I am just human—sometimes demanding, controlling, even difficult and judgmental. AND, I am more often compassionate, sensitive to others, empathic and deeply loving. I am here to heal and be healed, and there are glorious teachers placed before me on a daily basis. Like this guy on the mat, and my partner.

The gift of our “chicken wing” moments, for those of us committed to becoming more fully compassionate and loving human beings—which for me are the goals of a spiritual path—is being reminded of our innate humanness, our limitations, our blind spots. Through practices such as meditation and yoga, we can become less reactive, more centered, more able to respond in ways that support constructive outcomes when things go awry. But we should never fall into the trap of thinking we are invulnerable or ego-less. We are all susceptible to a momentary flash of selfishness, rage, or pique. With practice these reactive moments come less often, are less severe, and linger less long...but they will still come, and for that we should be thankful. Likewise, let’s be thankful for the brothers, lovers, partners and friends who bring them to us, for unlike the guy who runs (ran) the Zen/yoga center, they keep us on track...and...out of jail!

So take heart. Be human. Be humble. Next time you have a “chicken wing” moment, take a deep breath, giggle at your ineptitude, and give yourself a great big spoonful of compassion. Doctor’s orders.