



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Actuary Magazine

December 2012/January 2013 – Volume 9 Issue 6

ACTUARIES ON THEIR OWN TIME

For a little more than a decade, **CAROLE VINCENT** has been practicing yoga. What started out of curiosity grew to becoming a yoga instructor. “I am a certified teacher of Yin yoga and Kundalini yoga. I practice both obviously, but I also do yoga Nidra (a yogic sleep) on a daily basis. I also occasionally go to a Hatha, or restorative, yoga class. I’ve tried many kinds and I encourage my students to try at least a few types because they achieve different things physically and mentally. The one that speaks the most to me is Kundalini yoga because it combines postures, breathing exercises and meditation in one class, sometimes even in one exercise. When stress becomes the obvious challenge, I do more yoga Nidra. Yoga is a very good stress management tool,” Vincent says.

Vincent describes the personal benefits of yoga by saying, “it brought in a new me. ...”

When asked for how many years she’s been practicing yoga, Vincent says, “I do not recall exactly (the actuary in me would like to be precise). I attended my first class in 2001, I think. I tried it out of curiosity. A teacher was coming to our office on a weekly basis to offer classes after work. I felt so relaxed after the first class, I instantly was addicted. I practiced as often as possible until 2005. I stopped writing actuarial exams then because I kept failing the same exam and got discouraged, I guess. I found myself with a lot of free time and started

to attend more yoga classes, and therefore practicing with different teachers. Because I struggled with knee problems all my life and am limited in some postures, I always had to tell the teacher about the condition and soon realized I was repeating my life story too often. My tendency to do things efficiently surfaced and I thought that I could take the teacher training class and use the knowledge for my own good as I would at least be able to adjust the postures on my own without telling my life story to the teacher. My intention was not to teach, but simply to not have to tell my story each time.”

Vincent describes the personal benefits of yoga by saying, “it brought in a new me. It benefits me on many levels. When I started, I was doing Hatha yoga which is solely about postures. I

therefore felt a lot of physical benefits; I had more strength, I became a lot more flexible and strangely felt taller. When I started to practice daily, I was doing Kundalini yoga which has a lot of mediation and breathing exercises. They contribute to increase focus and I felt a lot calmer and sharper. I learned a lot about my own limits and how to respect them. This is as good as seeing a psychologist and a lot cheaper. I became more aware of my own behavior, and after that, more aware of the behavior of my family, friends

and co-workers. It has an effect on the brain somehow—I am convinced of this because I changed habits gradually and without effort. I was eating better and even completely stopped coffee and alcohol for about six months. I felt more creative too. I think the main benefit though was during a time where I suffered from depression and I think it proved to be a very good stress management tool.”

What is Vincent’s favorite aspect of the practice of yoga? “When you say ‘aspect’ I think of the eight aspects of yoga (i.e., postures, breathing, meditation, etc.), but I think you probably mean how it affects one’s life. I guess my answer will be somewhat in the middle. What I love about yoga is the challenge it presents. For one thing, the challenge changes constantly. For example, when I started practicing, the challenge was about balance, strength, flexibility, etc. These days, the challenge is to quiet my mind. Then there are many aspects of yoga that are related to one’s view on things like ‘do no harm.’ The challenge is to know to what extent this should be applied. For example, is killing a bug that got into your ear and is causing infection going against this yoga principle of doing no harm?”

When asked if yoga creates a body, mind, and spirit connection, Vincent states, “the practice of yoga is a discipline dedicated to creating union between the body, mind and spirit. It would be odd to have a yoga instructor that does not see that.



Carole Vincent—practicing yoga.

“You do not need to believe in this, it happens automatically. Though, I feel the need to be an actuary here and define ‘spirit.’ I define spirit as a mood (not a soul or a supernatural being).

“‘A healthy mind in a healthy body’ is another way to see it. If you are healthy (mind and body), your spirit or state of mind or mood will be in good shape. I think it is not just yoga that can bring this state, but it does contribute because yoga works the body and mind simultaneously. An example would be to hold a posture for five minutes. During that time, you work physically but you will likely work your mind even harder to stay in the pose. It works both aspects simultaneously. Then when you are done, you are automatically happy you did it, or at least tried, and your mood (spirit) is improved. All my students smile after doing something like that.”

What does Vincent like about teaching yoga and meditation? “I currently teach only a

few private classes. It is not quite the same as teaching a group. What I like about teaching Kundalini yoga to a group is that there are always a few new students. The classes are always about the same thing, i.e., postures, relaxation and then meditation. Meditation is usually short and I love teaching this. While I am enthusiastic about that part, I can see that most first-time students are not happy. I am not sure why, but their body language is clearly saying ‘why is it difficult for me to just lie here in corpse pose for five minutes?’ Most of them struggle their way through it, and all of them are amazed in the end. I guess people are scared to sit still for five minutes and ‘do nothing.’ Eventually they realize they are actually doing something and that it is difficult and rewarding, and

it’s a better transition back to real life than just coming out of relaxation. I like to see them come to their own conclusions.”

Vincent sees an actuarial tie-in to practicing yoga in that she “sees a similarity for students because both require discipline. Studying for actuarial exams is somewhat of a lifestyle too. When I decided to go back and finish my exams, I was able to better focus, organize my work/studying schedule and calm myself down while reading the question during exams. Yoga helped me understand how my mind works in stressful situations and gave me tools I could use to manage it.

“I see benefits for those stressed by their job or anxious about specific issues at work or their personal lives. There is a fair amount of research done on that topic and it is an efficient stress management tool.

“The most obvious point to me, however, is the multiple aspects. The actuarial field has many

aspects, like yoga. For example, actuaries have to consider all kinds of assumptions, whatever actuarial track you are working in. It has a structure, things you need to consider, ranging from ethics to basic math logic. Yoga practitioners also consider many aspects. Most people think postures, which I compare to the basic math logic, but there are many other aspects like compassion for all living things (‘doing no harm’) which I compare to the ethics of the profession in a way.

“The ‘control of the senses’ could be compared to the ability of an actuary to disconnect from his work. For example, if you build a model, you cannot feel attached to it because you will never improve it and it will never get to be a sharp tool. Any actuary, whatever they do, has to be able to draw back or retreat from his work to assess it. If you disconnect from your senses, you get the same thing. If you are not attached to the sensorial distractions you are experiencing, you feel some kind of peace of mind. A simple exercise is to go to a bakery when you are hungry or coffee shop when you crave a coffee and then go on a day when you are not. You will experience something different. You will not feel the pressure to buy or taste something on those days because your senses will no longer depend on the stimulant. You will feel calmer and a peace of mind on the day where you are not hungry or do not need that coffee.

“The different aspects of yoga form the framework for a yoga practice as do the different competencies or skills of an actuary.” **A**

Carole Vincent, FSA, FCIA, is director, S&R Product Development & Pricing at Equitable Life Insurance of Canada. She can be contacted at cvmath@hotmail.com.

FOR MORE OUT OF THE OFFICE,
TURN TO PAGE 38

FRANK WALKER has been involved in water activities since he was child. His interest in canoeing became a love for kayaking by chance. “I had rented canoes over the years and had thought some about buying one. One day while biking, I happened to pass by a city park lake where they were having a kayak demo event. This was my first time to be in a kayak. I tried a sit-on top, and I was hooked. I’ve since advanced from a nine-foot sit-on top to an 18-foot sit-in kayak,” Walker says.

When asked if he has taken any classes or training, Walker states, “I haven’t taken any classes or training. I have been involved in water activities since I was a kid so paddling wasn’t foreign to me. One can pick up helpful tips from other kayakers or any number of videos on the Internet. I mostly do flatwater kayaking, as opposed to whitewater, so I have decided it’s not worth learning how to roll a kayak. If I chose to learn how to roll one, a class would be a good idea.”

What does Walker like best about kayaking? “What I liked first was the sense of freedom and power; I was impressed with how easy it was to make the kayak move at a respectable speed. Since then I’ve realized a myriad benefits that have me going about an average of 2.5 times per week, year ‘round. The benefits include: it’s a great way to exercise as it provides cardiovascular health and upper body muscle strength (which prior to kayaking, I had none); I weigh at my desired level (One can burn up to 400 calories per hour depending on how fast one paddles. I usually paddle pretty hard.); it’s a great way to clear your head of stress; I’ve seen beautiful nature scenes, from incredible sunsets on the water to a wide variety of wildlife, many of which I’ve taken pictures of. Besides all that, it’s fun.”

When asked if he makes special trips for photographs, Walker says, “Many of the photographs I take are just ones of scenes I happen along while kayaking. I don’t usually take special trips solely to take pictures, but I do enjoy and select scenic places to kayak. Being able to take pictures of what I see is just icing on the cake.”

What is his most memorable trip? “There have been numerous memorable trips, either due to the beautiful scenery or wildlife or the particular adventures of the trip, but probably the most memorable was competing in (and completing!) a 42.5 mile race down the Mississippi River. In my race category, defined only by length of kayak, I finished third out of 19. That was quite a confidence booster. I thought that was pretty good for me, being 53 years old at that time. Interestingly, my family wasn’t there at the finish line. I didn’t want them to worry about me so I told them I thought it would take me about six hours to finish. It only took me 5.5 hours (which was certainly long enough), and they were still up in the motel room watching TV.”

When asked if he’s ever had any mishaps while kayaking, Walker says, “On flatwater kayaking, which is mostly what I do, the most common mishap is that I underestimate the distance I’m kayaking and therefore underestimate my arrival time (sometimes significantly), which causes family members to worry.”



Frank Walker—on one of his kayaking trips.

“On whitewater kayaking or canoeing, wiping out or getting tumped is not an uncommon event, to which I can attest. One may not get tumped, but one should certainly be prepared for the contingency of such an event. It usually makes the trip memorable.”

Walker sees an actuarial tie-in to kayaking. “It’s more so for whitewater kayaking, but even for flatwater kayaking, there are certainly aspects of risk analysis and risk management. One has to know his capabilities in handling wind, waves, rapids, river obstacles such as trees, boulders, or small waterfalls. For kayak races, whether they be six or 22 or 42 miles long, one needs to set an appropriate pace so that he’s got something ‘reserved’ for the end of the race, which I haven’t mastered yet. Like actuaries, serious kayakers are disciplined and always seeking to improve their skills and make use of the best tools available.” **A**

Frank Walker, ASA, MAAA, is assistant actuary with Transamerica Worksite Marketing. He can be contacted at frank.walker@transamerica.com.

THOMAS HULL spends a lot of his free time exploring Alps. Having been born in Colorado and currently living in Zurich, that type of activity seems like a natural fit.

“Living in Zurich, I am already in—or at least on the edge of—the Alps, the mountain range that gave rise to the term ‘alpine’ for high mountain environments,” Hull says. “The Alps were formed by the collision of the African and Eurasian tectonic plates. This has given the Alps an immensely complex geology, and as the son and grandson of geologists, I find this quite interesting. Added to that, the Alps are shaped primarily by glaciers, giving rise to numerous narrow steep-walled u-shaped valleys, spectacular waterfalls, and sharp peaks and ridges. The Alps stretch from Slovenia and Austria in the east over Italy, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Germany, and France to Monaco. My exploration of the Alps involves mostly hiking and skiing, but also visiting the many different towns and villages. Because of the difficulty of getting from one valley to the next throughout history, there are often surprising differences in language, architecture and culture in locations that are quite close together—as the crow flies.

Part of Hull’s outdoor activities involve volunteering to maintain natural habitats. Here is what Hull says about it. “In the United States I have done some trail building and revegetation in mountain and urban environments. In Switzerland I have so far participated mostly in maintenance of historic landscapes.

“In the Canton of Zurich there is a landscape that is actually not ‘original,’ but one that was created in years before industrialization and then the modern service economy. This landscape involved creating channels for groundwater in boggy areas to allow farming.

Over a couple of centuries, a habitat grew up that supported migrating birds, amphibians, certain plants, etc. With new farming techniques and more urbanization, these habitats aren’t maintained as much, and there are groups that are involved in maintaining them. As an American from a country where people have lived in great numbers only in the last couple of hundred years, it seems very strange to ‘restore’ something to other than what might have existed before significant human habitation. Upon reflection, though, I realized two things. First, humans have lived here for thousands of years, with Neolithic finds confirming the great length of habitation. Second, Native Americans also had an impact on their environment, so it is hard to define what is meant by an ‘original’ state. So ultimately, providing migrating birds, amphibians, and certain plants a habitat seems worthwhile!”

When asked if he sees an actuarial tie-in to his pastime, Hull states, “This is an interesting question, because I view my pastime as a way to get away from the corporate world and recharge my batteries. But as an actuary I am trained in certain ways of thinking and evaluating the world. My answer risks being perceived as a political statement, but it comes from my training as a scientist who works with data and attempts to draw conclusions about possible futures. Over a lifetime spent in the wilderness, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of a changing



Thomas Hull—enjoying the great outdoors.

climate in receding glaciers particularly. Most other changes are harder to see firsthand, because they involve changes in trends with significant noise along the way. The environment is a complex system with many variables affecting changes—indeed, the earth’s climate has varied greatly over the millennia. But looking at the timing of change and the correlation to human activity, I don’t think a data scientist can honestly deny we are having an impact. The piece that most interests me is that with such a complex system we don’t really know what the outcomes will be, and I’d like to see more of the debate focused on risk assessment—mitigation and management. We can’t roll back all of the change at any cost, so what do we do? Reinsurers in particular focus a great deal of energy on this, but it has enormous social implications beyond our industry of course.” **A**

Thomas Hull, FSA, is partner, AIMS, with PricewaterhouseCoopers. He can be contacted at thull.colorado@gmail.com.