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BY CATHLEEN FALSANI Religion Columnist

Last Friday night, rather than watch a movie or slug about the house, I decided to do something new and, hopefully, constructive.

That's how I wound up lying on the floor in a candlelit studio in the Fine Arts Building on South Michigan Avenue, listening to gong music and chanting for prosperity.

Technically speaking, I was experiencing a "gong bath" at the Kundalini in the Loop studio, a yogic practice designed to induce deep relaxation.

More specifically, the gong bath was part of an evening of yoga and meditation for "prosperity and abundance in the New Year."

What with the economy the way it is and the print journalism enterprise struggling to survive, I figured it couldn't hurt to lift some prayers and intentions for my newspaper, my colleagues and myself.

Fifteen of us -- men and women, old and young, black and white -- gathered at 6:30 p.m. and began with a mantra (or prayer): *Ong Namu Guru Dev Namu*, which means

"I bow to the Creator, I bow to the Divine Teacher."

I directed my prayer to Jesus because that's how I roll. But others in the class were of different faith traditions -- Christian, Sikh, others and, I would imagine, none. All prayed or meditated in their own way.

There was power, if not a religious consensus, in joining in that mantra. The studio immediately felt like a sacred space.

After the mantra, we arranged ourselves on yoga mats on the floor, and Shakta Kaur - the instructor, clad all in white (turban included) and seated on sheepskins on a small, raised platform -- led us through a few yoga poses.

"Don't worry about getting the poses exactly right," Shakta said. "All you really need to do is lean in the right direction."

I liked that thought. So many of us obsess about getting whatever we're doing exactly right. When we fall short, we feel we've failed. That can lead to a paralysis -- emotional and spiritual. But what really matters is our intention. All we really need to do to begin a journey toward any goal is to lean in the right direction.

So I leaned in, stretched, breathed deeply and tried to open myself up to abundance, in whatever form it might take.

Kundalini yoga is a highly spiritualized form of yoga, focused on moving energy around the body. It teaches that energy resides coiled -- like a snake or a lock of hair - at the base of the spine. Yoga postures, breathing exercises and meditations help move the energy up through the body (through the charkas, or energy centers) to the top of the head.

I don't know whether I buy into all of that, but I do appreciate the feeling of centeredness and peace I found in the 90-minute session with Shakta, who has been teaching kundalini in the Loop since 2000. Each of Shakta's January and February classes -- gong meditations, kundalini or simple hatha yoga sessions -- is focused on prosperity and abundance.

We worked up quite a sweat doing the five poses, which involved squatting and bowing to touch our foreheads to the ground (harder than it sounds), sitting in lotus position and popping up to our knees repeatedly, and beating the ground vigorously with our palms (my triceps are still feeling the effects a week later).

Then, Shakta turned down the lights and had us all recline on the mats with a blanket over us as she and her partner/husband Hare Dev Singh began sounding two gongs. The effect of the sound of the complimentary gongs really did feel like a massage. The gong bath went on for 22 minutes. Some folks fell asleep. A few even snored. I just relaxed, deeply, for the first time in months.

Next, we chanted a mantra for prosperity and abundance (in whatever form) for 11 minutes. Each of the eight verses of the mantra began with the words, *Har har har har* (meaning, "God, God, God, God") followed by different words evoking various

characteristics of the Divine.

"Gobinday," meaning "sustainer."

"Udaaray," meaning "enlightener."

"Kariang," meaning "creator."

And so on.

Shakta encouraged us to examine things in our lives that might be blocking us from prosperity and abundance, be they self-doubts, fears or relationships that are harmful and not nurturing.

"Everyone's birthright is to be happy," Shakta told me later. "You didn't incarnate to have a miserable time. You incarnated to take on particular tasks and to finish them and to go home victorious."

When I think of abundance, I think of the freedom to love without limits, to be fully present with the people we care about, to be open to whatever God has for us to do in this life.

Kundalini yoga was designed for everyday people -- "householders," as they were called, Shakta explained. "We're not going to be in a cave for 20 years practicing a posture to perfection," she said. "The ancients knew that the householders in India, they need to have access to this technology, they need to lead a healthy, happy, prosperous life."

The class ended with another prayer in the form of a song called "Long Time Sun." As we sang it in unison for several minutes, Shakta told us to think of it as a blessing for ourselves and for the people we love.

The words of the prayer were beautiful. I sang them for myself, for my colleagues, and for all of the people who matter most to me in this world:

*May the long time sun shine upon you
All love surround you
And the pure light within you
Guide your way on.*

For more information about kundalini and a schedule of upcoming classes, go online to www.shaktakaur.com.

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