



It Only Matters What It Feels Like

Reaching Nirvana, losing weight, getting fit, making friends, all while finding your bliss.

Story by Susan Heller

There is a spot in the very heart of downtown Westport that is utterly magical. Not woo-woo magic, more like “This is great! How come I didn’t know this existed? What a fun and human heartfelt place of joy” kind of enchantment. There is hilarity and spinning bodies, sweat, rapture and friendship. It is a place where you have the opportunity to be creative and where you can always succeed. I don’t know about you, but the “always succeeding” part really works for me.

Before I go any further I must tell you that this is an entirely biased presentation. I have been going to Studio 44 and its previous incarnation, Chi Fitness, for years. That said, it is also why I can give you the inside story on this utterly unique experience.

Herewith the basics: In addition to a coffee bar/fresh-fruit hang-out space, Studio 44 includes a beautiful 1500 sq. ft. studio filled with light, grounded by wood-sprung dance floors. To say it features fitness and dance is like saying Tiffany has sparkly things and Connecticut has trees. Totally underwhelming description.

The key to the magic derives from the like-attracts-like principle (which in quantum physics is called the strong force and is approximately 100 times stronger than the electromagnetic force which makes like charges repel one another), meaning that the quality of the instructors attracts quite extraordinary people to what can only be described as a seriously great playground. These teachers infuse their classes with kindness and connection, so that for many people the fellowship of other members transforms into deep and lasting friendships.

Let’s start with the romp factor: dance. First, you don’t have to be a dancer. That’s where the, “it doesn’t matter what it looks like; it only matters what it feels like” comes in. Think very creative Zumba on steroids with much better music, lots of different routines, way more fun moves and, oh yes, a (jet engine) afterburner of sorts. Okay, wait. I’m getting ahead of myself. I haven’t space to introduce all of the kick-ass instructors at Studio 44, so I’m featuring only two of them who’ve been in it from the beginning. First up, Sue Benton, who actually is the aforementioned afterburner.

Take a Ride

It’s hard to describe. Sue exudes something like a comet-tail of energy that people ride on, literally, whether they’re moving at Level 1, 2 or 3. When Sue dances, her sheer joy and love of what she’s doing

gives everyone an energy transfusion. Maybe popcorn popping is a better simile. When Sue goes off, she sets all the other kernels in the room off too.

Sue acknowledges the experience: “The energy really is contagious and the teacher is in charge of that. It’s just that I love it so much it takes me out of myself which is a good thing because, in fact, thinking gets in my way. My brain gets engaged and my body loses its place. It’s not always effortless to be in the moment, that’s why it’s a practice. When I can truly be in that feeling/moving space, even though nothing has changed in your life, if I’ve helped you work something out—tension or anxiety—then at the very least you’ve had an hour of not dwelling in some stressful difficult space. Dance is a spiritual practice, it is church for me.”

That reverence is a sensibility that many at Studio 44 are familiar with, including those who are new to the experience of moving to music. If work or life has taken us away for a time, we tease one another

about undergoing dance deprivation. However, the reality is that most people go to class for nurturance and sustenance of the heart as well as to burn calories and have fun. I have witnessed people, and I have also been one, who has found my way through some very dark times by dancing my brains out. Nobody can tell if you’re crying or sweating, or both. As Sue says, “Every day you can start again, even if you’ve never moved before. We all love you when you come into my class, and we’ll encourage you. And it’s doubly brave for a man, but we do have guys



who come in and get hooked on the fellowship and fun.”

“Everybody in that room,” Sue continues, “knows what it’s like to be the new person in class. So every time somebody new comes in, people welcome them and reassure them that it’s about the fun not the form, encouraging them to have a good time. The more people don’t know which way to turn or what comes next, the more we all feel permission to let it be whatever it is for that day.”

Another side benefit of moving to music is that it encourages brain and body happiness. Without realizing it, people often find that they aren’t interested in junk food, or they don’t do the emotional eating thing, or they’re more patient with family because they’ve found a way to release life’s stress in a way that feels good to body, mind and soul. Sue notes that her classes “are synchronous. After a short while you’ll begin to hear people whooping it up or vocalizing at the same time. And sometimes when you walk in you’ll see a bunch of people wearing the exact same shade of purple or green and we’ll roll our eyes and say,

'Oh I see you got the virtual message'. Lots of laughter."

I Hope You Dance...

Sue is big on refusing to listen to what I call inertia propaganda. "We have to ignore all the people who say to you, 'Hey, you're not 40 anymore, you should slow down'. Are you kidding? As far as I'm concerned as long as you keep moving your body, you're going to be okay. Dance also helps cognition, coordination and balance. When people ask, 'How long do you think you can keep doing this?', 'I intend on dancing forever;' that's my answer, 'until the day I die.' And I'll be very, very old that day."

While I consider myself a total hack when it comes to dancing, (I jump up and down, scream and yell to music), Sue's "Dance 44" class also attracts what I call some real deal dancers. From Alvin Ailey alumni and owners of dance schools, to ballet babes and Broadway boys, they're fun to watch and to play with. Sue's reaction to them is evocative of both her talent and humility: "I have no training, technical or otherwise, and I'm always worried that they're going to hate me. But that is just me plugging into my fear and I can dispel that. So whatever people are doing—Level 1,2 or 3—if I put the most into it that I can, then I'm getting that reflected back at me. It's like you're giving a party and you want everybody to have fun and so you worry about everyone from beginner to pro. When I let go of that worry, meaning I don't have to be perfect, everybody relaxes into the fun. So I'm giving them a break, but I'm giving myself a break too."

The joyous booster-bump that Sue provides has an interesting psychological corollary that I didn't fully realize until we started taking videos of classes. It turns out that everybody in the room thinks/feels that we look like her when we do a move. On the home page of the website there is an opening slow-motion shot of her flowing into a half body back bend, and in our mind's eye (though as you can see, not in reality) so are we. The confidence and fun is infectious. Which is why when Candy McCarthy, owner of Studio 44, wanted to participate in the 2012 Westport Downtown Merchants Art Fair, Sue and fellow teacher Meg Roe (Alvin Ailey alum) decided to stage a Flash Mob on Main Street. It was hilarious. You can see that video on the website as well.

I can think of innumerable times when the weather has been humid and hot, or snowy and icy, or holidays were causing angst, so that people were coming to class feeling tired and stressed. Whenever she sees that, Sue simply focuses on kicking the daylights out of the routine and everybody in the room responds with spikes of energy, which in turn lights her up, and that creates the wonderful reciprocity of the call and response whereby everybody eggs everyone else on.

Let me pause here to remind you that 97% of the people in the studio are not "dancer dancers". And to digress a bit further, here's a brief non-rhetorical question (meaning if you know the answer, I'd love to hear from you): "When in our lifetime did our vernacular adopt the sensibility that when you say a word twice, you change its meaning? As in, 'She's not an actress actress,' or 'Nice guy, but is he smart smart?'"

Well, Sue is a choreographer choreographer. Translated from the current idiom that means she experiences her work as instinct. It's in her DNA and the line between life and dance has no sharp edges for her. In her blog, "Dance With Life," (<http://suesbenton.blogspot.com>) she says, "The happiest experience for me is allowing myself to 'be' the music by expressing it with movement. But what can happen is that I

am so focused on 'getting' and on 'doing' the choreography that I end up dancing ahead of the music and finishing the phrase before everyone else. In life, when I am lost and confused, I will often try to 'do' my way to solving a problem. But that never works. If I can relax and trust that, like the music, life will lead me, it will allow me to get out of my own way and unravel the way to go. Life is music. Let it lead you."

Functional Fitness

Fitness, strength and balance instructor Stephanie Taddei first joined what was then Chi Fitness in the summer of 2001. She says, "I met Sue and I loved her immediately. I mean I was just floored by her. I adored her and in the first five minutes I thought 'Okay, count me in.'"

Now before you get to thinking this is all too nice-nice, phony baloney, consider the fact that at one point a TV producer wanted to do a reality show based on the Studio. He even went so far as to film interviews and background, but...there was no drama to be had. Attempts to foment unrest fell flat because, unfortunately, all the instructors truly got along. There was no competition. Worse, there was cooperation and lots of cross-pollination of ideas and moves. So much for the dark side. Every time Sue does one of Louisa Tanno's (professional dancer, singer, musician) routines, she gives her a shout-out and a ringing endorsement for those who haven't yet tried one of her classes, to make sure they do.

As for Stephanie, Sue says, "Her classes are seriously, hands down, the best body sculpting, physical work-outs I've ever done. I tell people, 'Just go to her class and do whatever she tells you to do, you're going to be happy.' Because she is a gifted professional, and she knows her stuff inside out. I use her techniques for posture and muscle control in my warm-up because they're just the best."

The difference is evident from the start. Stephanie's classes do not look like any other group exercise class. She says, "There are teachers who want to see everyone doing exactly the same thing in a kind of lockstep and that is worrisome to me. If everyone is feeling pressured to do that they're not taking into account the differing body shapes, height or flexibility levels, and that's when injuries happen."

Stephanie's approach is to invite people to inhabit a motion, to be there consciously. She is well aware that the bouncy, ballistic cheerleader thing that women have learned and the herky-jerky motion men use with weights is not only ineffective, but people get hurt. So, in addition to conditioning for dance, Stephanie's routines are functional exercise for living life. As when you get out of a car, reach up high overhead or lift heavy objects, you are twisting, turning and torquing your back, hips and neck. Having a strong core and understanding how to move will prevent injuries.

"One-size-fits-all does not work in this field," she explains. "There is a level of personal integrity when you are in charge of other people's bodies. Being an instructor is a huge responsibility because people will do what an instructor tells them to do. So I constantly give permission to not do what I'm saying but to utilize the modifications I offer based on my knowledge of each member's issues: back, knees, joints, whatever." That said, make no mistake, these classes are the most challenging I've ever taken. We moan and groan and threaten her, but to no avail. She just laughs, cranks up the music and we continue.

There's part of that magical incantation again. Music. And laughter. "I'm not up there with a whip," Stephanie says. "I'm one of the group





and we're doing this together." Which is professional-speak for "We're all suffering", and she will be the first one to look around the class and ask, "Who the hell thought this up?"

Like most people who are exceedingly good at what they do, she makes it all appear effortless. In reality, her ratio of preparation to presentation is 10 to 1. Those ten hours of prep include ongoing research in physiology, conferences, courses, and seminars where the latest information meets the newest innovative choreography. Her music choices are also time-consuming; every class she teaches is different because she knows that the body has a memory and can become complacent

with repetition. To challenge that reality she choreographs exercises in different planes: lying down, standing, at the ballet barre, even sitting on chairs. "First, I design the choreography based on making my way through the body, then I pick the music that will enable people to move with the right beat and flow between different exercises."

No Tipping Over

Simply put, balance is a learned skill. In the beginning, it took you up to four years to fine tune your ability to walk, stand, run and jump and, just like any learned skill, if you don't use it you will lose it. Think

of the elderly people you see who are unsteady on their feet, tottering, insecure in their own bodies. Balance has to be practiced.

Stephanie was way ahead of the knowledge curve on this issue. "I started teaching a Power & Balance class 17 years ago, based on a need I saw in men and women as they got older. People didn't know what to think, but I stuck to my guns. Now, it's all the rage. Golf, tennis, racquetball, pick-up basketball, any of the sports that are generally relevant to people over thirty, require physical conditioning. So I talk about the muscles that act as a cradle for your lower back and I include preventative exercises. Before you get bad knees or a wonky shoulder, you need to strengthen the muscles that surround and support your joints. So much of it does come from the need to preclude an injury, but it's also hugely important, as people get ready for, or recuperate from, surgery."

By this time it should be readily apparent why Stephanie has people who have followed her wherever she taught for 25 years.

The "no pain, no gain" thing has hopefully finally been laid to rest. It's unintelligent for athletes at twenty; it's unintelligent for mothers and weekend warriors and unintelligent for people who are aging. "Of course you should feel the muscles that you worked," agrees Stephanie, "but people worked themselves until things got twisted or broken. When people do that when they are young and their bodies can handle it better, if they use incorrect form or push it to the pain place, they will end up with serious arthritis, knee replacements, severe back pain, all those kinds of issues."

"You don't have to suffer to be fit. It's supposed to be fun!" she exclaims with mock exasperation. "I don't use angry, pounding music, so you can be joyous and laugh a little bit and still get an amazing workout. If you're in my class and you're laughing while you're doing what works for your body, then I've succeeded in doing my job."

Studio 44 is located at 44 Main Street in Westport, CT. You can call them at 203.454.1444 or visit them at www.facebook.com/Studio44DanceandFitnessCenter

Susan Heller has earned a reputation for excellence as a Writer, Ghostwriter, Producer and Director. She also designs and directs; TV spots, advertising, video and multimedia presentations when she's not writing speeches or helping other professionals hone their public speaking skills.



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