



the ultimate mind-body connection

first-generation instructor **mary bowen**
blends jungian analysis with pilates
and goes where no one has gone before

Touring memory lane with Mary Bowen does not lead one down a straight and narrow path. There are bends along the way, ambling twists, turns and tangents that she knows well but which an observer finds more kaleidoscopic than linear. Yet

this makes perfect sense, given that this former student of Joe and Clara's, who's been practicing Pilates for half a century and teaching it nearly as long, is also a Jungian analyst—a distinction shared with no one else on the planet.

Not only is it impossible to pin the fiercely intelligent and grounded Mary Bowen down, but it's also a challenge just to keep up with her. Closing in on her 80th year, she has the vitality of a woman half her age. And she looks terrific: dark hair, a youthful complexion, bright eyes, a playful smile, a dancer's perfect posture and, of course, a still-fit Pilates body. Today, 50 years after her first meeting with Joe and Clara, Bowen maintains an active teaching schedule. At a time in life when you'd think she might be slowing down and rewarding herself for a life of tremendous service, Bowen still works seven days a week—in three states. So catch her if you can.

Bowen's unorthodox life path is a reflection of the woman herself, who first went to 939 Eighth Avenue in hopes of finding relief for her back pain. She went back twice a week for six years and then spent seven years each with Bob Seed, Romana Kryzanowska, Kathy Grant and Bruce King. In 1995 she started taking lessons with Christine Wright, for a total of 50 years of private Pilates lessons—and counting!

This Pilates training required an actual train ride, as the young married Bowen was living outside New Haven with her doctor husband and working happily as an actress in musical theater and summer stock. But when urged to “go for it” in theater, something inside her balked, sending her into psychoanalysis for answers. This weekly session, on top of her Pilates and singing lessons, made for very busy Tuesdays in Manhattan. As the years went by, Bowen wound up journeying so deeply into the work with the psyche and Pilates that they both emerged as her primary professions.

By the time she turned 40, Bowen was working as a Jungian analyst, and, after 20 years of marriage, she found herself single again and living in an 1810 Federal Colonial home on 32 acres of forest with a number of cats. In 1975 a group of dedicated psychoanalysis clients who had moved from New Haven to Northampton, MA (but

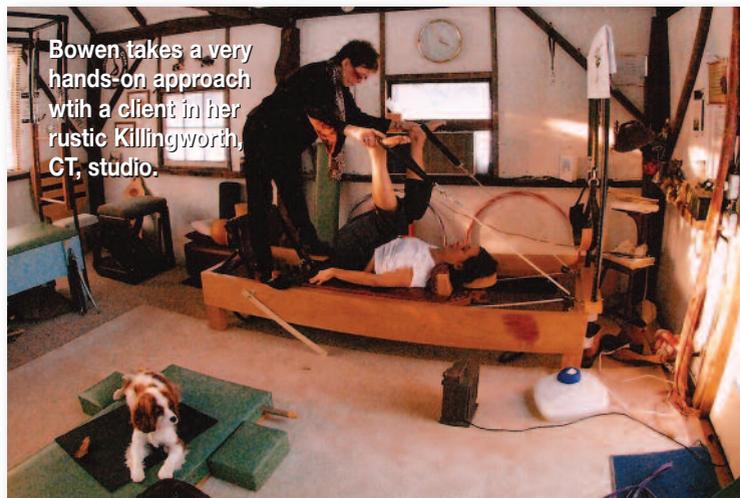
were still making a weekly trek for their sessions), tendered a mutually beneficial offer: Come open a practice up there and move into the top floor of a building they were vacating as they renovated an old department store for themselves. Bowen accepted, carted some furniture out of storage and went.

Among the furniture were some pieces of Pilates equipment, which she set up in the back room of her analytic office. Fascinated, the clients wanted to learn what one did on the apparatus, but before she agreed to teach them, Bowen sought permission from Romana. Her mentor gave her blessings to teach her friends, but said that she must make up her own name and say the teaching was “based on” the Pilates method.

So Bowen opened Your Own Gym, where she taught students when she was

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in town, and, when she wasn't, they could come in and work by themselves. In 1981 she moved to the converted department store and expanded the studio to include more equipment, plus saunas and massage rooms. Until that building was sold, in 2006, Your Own Gym bore the distinction of being the longest-standing Pilates



Bowen takes a very hands-on approach with a client in her rustic Killingworth, CT, studio.

studio in New England—32 years. A year later she moved her studio to her home in Northampton, renaming both it and her Killingworth studio Lifelong Pilates with Mary Bowen.

It was on the occasion of the opening of the expanded studio that a friend of Bowen's, Evelyn de la Tour, a dance instructor and former friend of Joe and Clara's, handed her two boxes of film reels containing footage of the Pilates and some students and friends, taken between 1932 and 1945. For a decade they remained unopened, until Pilates had gotten popular enough for Bowen to dedicate the necessary time editing the many, many hours she'd inherited. With professional help, she put together 70 minutes of invaluable footage on Joe: in youthful vigor (and of course, bare-chested), demonstrating acrobatic handstands and German gymnastics, teaching Contrology exercises and performing moves on his inventions (what we now call the Spine Corrector and Wunda Chair). There's even a “before and after” demo of a beginning student on the Reformer in his studio.

“In all my 50 years of Pilates, the last 10, in my 70s, have been the time of the greatest release and integration,” notes Bowen, who, after all these years, still considers herself a student of the method. “My own lessons with Christine Wright have been and will always be a solid base for my own well-being. I believe we should never stop being a student, and we

PHOTO BY ANN STRONG

need to get out of our own studios to take care of ourselves. There are too many distractions there. I have found my own lessons to be absolutely necessary. Spend a fortune if you have to! It'll come back to you in ways you can't see ahead of time."

When *Pilates Style* decided, years ago, to do a Powerhouse profile on Mary

Bowen, we struggled to find the proper approach. Somehow, with this exceptionally articulate and self-reflective person, our typical Q+A format didn't seem quite right. She has generously supplied us with more material than we could possibly fit into one story. So what we offer you here is a just a small sample of Mary Bowen. Stay tuned for more at pilatesstyle.com.



I could say my life is like a comfortable stool with four solidly based legs. Each leg grew from the depth and passion of a journey—not by intention. Three legs emerged when I was 29, from personal needs. My journey into the psyche went so deep that it turned me into an analyst, and for the past 39 years it has provided me with an active practice that shuttles me back and forth from offices in New York City, Killingworth, CT, and Northampton, MA.

The second leg that began when I was 29 was my relationship to the Pilates method. Sixteen years later I began teaching it by request. It was too good not to share. This year, 2009, marks my 50th anniversary of living Pilates, with no end yet in sight, fulfilling a promise I made to Joe that "I will always do Pilates."

Interestingly, these two legs can stand together or alone. It seems a good balance. An analyst sits and is nondirective. A Pilates teacher is a body in motion directing from top to bottom. But in 1995, without my even knowing it, the analyst in me started joining in on the Pilates sessions, offering up all kinds of helpful attitudes and information about problems the teachers and clients were having with themselves or each other. The reception of this new approach was so positive that it has evolved into a whole new deep approach to Pilates work that has come to be called Pilates Plus Psyche. Today a session with me

can go one of three main ways: Pilates Only, with emphasis all on the body; it can be Psyche Only, where focused work with one's unconscious is the emphasis (this can happen in person or by telephone); or it can be Pilates Plus Psyche, where the whole person is addressed and engaged, both the conscious and the unconscious.

The third leg of my stool, another

"Clara could sense us. I'll never forget her hands on me to give me her cue. Her touch spoke realms."

passion of my life that I discovered at age 29, is cats. I couldn't sit still at that time, and I knew intuitively that having a cat would help with that. I found my first cat, Cinderella, in an animal shelter. Cats see and notice everything. I learned through living with my cats how to sit back, sit still and observe, and not always feel the need to jump in.

Joe was a cat lover. He said he based his method on the baby and the cat, which he saw as the most

superior creation among animals, the quickest, strongest, most flexible and highly functional of all. Over the years I have had about 45 cats, each an absolute delight in my life and each a teacher extraordinaire. My dear husband, Alec Martin, to whom I've been married for 32 years and who can fix and build everything under the sun, is as devoted as I am to the love of nature and its creatures. Animals, domestic and wild, are an important part of the fabric of our everyday lives.

The fourth and final leg of the stool came in at birth and has always been with me: a sense of humor and the capacity to make people laugh. It could have become my profession, but I had different journey to take—into the dark to come forth as myself. Humor has always been a help, for myself and others. It softens our hardest times and aids us in finding perspective.

I thought I had left it behind when I stopped performing in theater, but nothing stays left behind. When I was around 65, it started coming through again in Pilates sessions, which clients told me was a terrific teaching tool. Then I began to see that aging is a wonderful thing. All parts of oneself can come back and join in whenever inspired. It seems nothing good is ever really lost. It just goes quiet and waits.

pilates back in the day...

Joe and Clara are two of the most

From left: Practicing Tower on the Cadillac at age 51. In St. Croix, dog-sitting, 1995. A recent shot in her CT studio. A new one is being built for when she's ready to "get off the hamster wheel."



unforgettable characters of my life: he with his powerful physique, big barrel of a bare chest, white mane of hair, bare legs, tight swimming trunks and white canvas shoes with straps over the instep to keep them on; she in her white nurse's uniform and white shoes, with her white hair, making no attempt to show the feminine. Joe was always out front, the showpiece, and Clara was in the background, running the practical end of things.

Each was a gifted teacher and treated everyone with equal respect. There was no kissing up to anyone. Joe was a bit soft on the women, a bit harder on the men. I found him always supportive and encouraging and not loathe to praise you. But Joe didn't personalize us. He knew our faces and our bodies, but he didn't know our names or anything personal about our lives. We were his students, his clients—an extension of his work. Clara was a thinking intuitive. She could sense us. I'll never forget her hands on me to give me a cue. Her touch spoke realms.

The studio, on the second floor of a building on Eighth Avenue, was plain, barren of any eros or femininity, a place to work on your body. There

taught the beginning exercises and then set loose to do them on your own with cues and tips along the way. There was the one big room for the studio with small dressing rooms and showers (for men and for women) and another big room alongside it, where they lived. The bathroom was down the hall.

In all my years there, I heard Joe complain only twice: once about a woman who came in not so much to work out as to show off her body. The other time was when a regular client, a very fit-looking doctor, died from a heart attack while in Paris. I overheard him tell Clara, "I'll never get the money he owes me." Joe and Clara had very little means. They charged so little, 5 or 10 dollars, and gave so much. They had a car and a little house in Beckett, MA, that they used as a country retreat. They lived utterly simply, giving their lives to their work.

Joe was 76 when I began studying with him. In another eight years he would be dead from emphysema. He showed no sign of ill health for my first four or five years, but after that, I would sometimes hear him call out to Clara, "I can't breathe." I learned from Evelyn de la Tour that Joe had become very disillusioned

was no chitchat; it was all about the work. You were

with American laziness. Fitness only really came in the 1970s and Joe died in 1967. He had been discouraged that physicians and the powers that be never understood or appreciated what he had to offer. Evelyn said that's why he took up smoking cigars and became less careful about his own health. He was very angry when he died that he had not been listened to or followed—except by those of us lucky to have found him and have our lives transformed by his method. Two days before he died, he reported to his lawyer friend John Steel that "all the world will be doing my method." Joe never once wavered in his vision about his work or his confidence in it.



Mary Bowen is available for the following CEC offerings:

- 3- and 4-day workshops in the U.S. and abroad
- 3- to 6-hour, 1- or 2-day intensives for teachers and advanced students at her CT or MA studios
- 3- to 6-hour intensives at studios in Greater NYC, eastern CT and western MA
- private individual sessions

For more information or to order a copy of her archival DVD, visit pilates-marybowen.com.