

September/October 2006 • Vol 2 • No 5

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The Journal of Science and Healing



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Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence

By Matthew W. Sanford

New York, NY: Rodale, 2006; ISBN: 1-59486-302-4; 256 pages; Cost: \$23.95

I invited Matt Sanford to speak to our medical students in 2005, not knowing much more about him other than the facts that he was a yoga teacher and that he was paralyzed from the chest down. He wheeled into the lecture hall, showing an easy confidence and a warm smile and began a dialogue about healing and the impact that “healing stories” have on each of us. He told of the car accident that took the lives of his father and sister and left him, as a boy of 13, with a fractured spine and paraplegia. And he told about the tremendous power comments (oftentimes, offhand remarks from physicians and other members of the care team) can wield on the patient. Such comments become “healing stories,” paradigms that a patient may follow, sometimes to their detriment.

For example, after repeatedly hearing that his legs would never work again and that any sensations he felt could only be in his mind, Matt reached a logical conclusion for a 13-year-old boy—he asked to have his legs amputated. He had heard the “healing story” so often about how his legs would always be useless to him that he reasoned jettisoning them would be that much less dead weight to deal with. The care team, in attempting to convey one aspect of the truth to Matt, had created the scenario where a young boy wished to part with his legs. When he spoke, he left an incredible impression on the audience about the delicate balance all healers must

walk—between truth and dogmatic dictums, between brutal reality and leaving room for hope.

The hour lecture only provided a glimpse into the complex life Matt had led and barely scratched the surface of the questions that intrigued me most. How had yoga come to be a passion for this engaging young man? And how could somebody who was paralyzed from the chest down teach others how to do things he could not? We kept in touch, and I began to learn more about Matt’s life and his work. For example, he is the founder of Mind Body Solutions, a nonprofit organization that has the following introduction on its Web site:

“The work at Mind Body Solutions revolves around a simple idea: minds and bodies work better together. Connecting mind more deeply with body offers a practical, intelligent approach to health and wholeness, both for individuals and for our society at large. Our aim is to help integrate this insight into our everyday lives.”¹

Mind Body Solutions operates a yoga studio, an innovative workplace program called Bringing Your Body to Work, and offers workshops within the healthcare sector.

Matt’s insight into the importance of connecting the mind and body resonated with all that I knew in regards to healing. Thus, I was delighted to learn that he was writing a book about his experiences and the role that yoga played in helping him reconnect mind and body. I am happy to report that *Waking* answered all my questions and exceeded all my expectations.

On one level, *Waking* is a compelling story of a young boy who grows to be a young man while facing incredible physical and mental challenges. Matt writes with a gritty realism, tempered by good humor and an amazing deftness with language that keeps the reader turning pages. As we follow Matt’s life story, a harsh light is shined on the care he received in the early months following the car accident. This unfortunately includes care that he

received at the Mayo Clinic. (An aside: Having trained and practiced at Mayo for my entire career, I read those passages with a bit of gut wrenching and defensiveness. Yet one realizes that, in 1978, simply surviving the devastating injuries such as Matt experienced was a heroic application of cutting edge technology. And, today, while the technology is still cutting edge, the dedication to the Mayo primary value, “The needs of the patient come first,” is evident in a number of care initiatives, including the Complementary and Integrative Medicine Program I am privileged to lead.) While the care Matt received was technically excellent and he is grateful for his life, the “healing stories” he heard from physicians and other caregivers were often unthinking, careless, and hurtful. We see the impact such comments have as we follow Matt’s life from the shattered 13-year-old boy to a grown man, with a family and a leading role in adapting yoga for people living with disabilities.

On another level, *Waking* is an amazing interpretation of the mind-body connection, explored as few others ever could. The silence of his lower body, his mind’s attempts to “reconnect” on some level, and the role yoga plays for Matt in that ongoing experience is a phenomenal lesson for all interested in the mind-body connection at its deepest level. This book is an excellent teacher. It reminds all of us engaged in the healing profession of the power of our words. It also conveys a message for everyone about the power of the human body for healing and connectedness, even when the silence is deepest.

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REFERENCES

1. Mind Body Solutions. Available at: <http://www.mindbodysolutions-mn.org/HTML%20pages/About%20Us%20Files/about%20Us%20w%20frames.html>. Accessed August 24, 2006.