

spirit ~ TRIUMPH



## Trauma to transcendence

A harbinger of hope and transformation, Matthew Sanford has inspired and enhanced the lives of thousands as he demystifies the mind-body connection through his work as an author, speaker and yoga teacher. Paralyzed at 13 in a devastating car accident that killed his sister and father, Matthew followed the advice of doctors to “forget his lower body” until at 25 he discovered yoga and the healing power of the mind-body connection. Now 42, Matthew brings his powerful message of healing to health care, corporate, yoga and general audiences nationwide. His pioneering work began in 1998, teaching an adaptive yoga class for people living with a wide range of disabilities. Realising all people could benefit by having a deeper connection between mind and body, Matthew founded Mind Body Solutions in 2001,

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by Jamuna Rangachari

a non-profit organisation dedicated to transforming trauma and loss into hope and potential. He is also the author of the critically acclaimed book, *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence*. Following are excerpts from our interview with him.

**What made you explore yoga as an option when you were incapacitated?**

I did not come to yoga right away. It took 12 years of living with paralysis from the chest down before I began. Long story short, I started Iyengar yoga because I missed my body. Twelve years of paralysis left me feeling like a floating upper torso, not a person with a whole body. I picked yoga because I figured what better way to integrate my mind with my paralysed body than with an ancient, long established discipline that is expressly committed to integrating mind, body, and spirit.

**What were the defining moments in your battle with disability?**

I would not call it a battle. I would call it a journey. The most defining moment not just with my disability, but also with

my life's work came when I decided to explore a different path from that laid out by doctors. This decision began with bodywork, but quickly turned to yoga.

Yoga has brought me many benefits. I have regained a sense of presence throughout my entire body, including my paralysed body. This has led to improvements in my balance, my strength, my flexibility, my motor planning, my respiration, my proprioception, and my overall health. My gains in inward awareness now make it possible for me to tell when I need to empty my bladder and bowels, and when I am in pain.

In general, I feel more complete, more vibrant and more connected to the world. My 17 years of yoga practice have also shown me ways that our rehabilitative process can teach mind-body awareness to people living with disabilities. This is now a focus of my work and the work of my non-profit [mindbodiesolutions.org](http://mindbodiesolutions.org).

**Who have been your inspirations in life?**  
Martin Luther King, Gandhi, the students in my adaptive yoga class that I have been teaching these past 11 years, and my sons, William and Paul.

**Do you feel yoga and specifically, Iyengar yoga, has the potential to help almost all people, irrespective of the severity of their ailment / disability.**  
Yes I do. The revolutionary attention Iyengar yoga places on alignment and precision is an effortless form of integration that benefits anyone with a mind and a body. Of course, this core insight of Iyengar yoga must be done carefully and by someone with skill.

**The body-mind connection is an important aspect of yoga. How has this affected your attitude towards life?**  
I feel more complete, more connected, more vibrant, and more hopeful. I believe deepening the connection between mind and body is a cornerstone of compassion. My work to help others is deeply root-

ed in the body-mind connection that I am exploring with yoga.

**Could you share your insights on your guru, Jo Zukovich?**  
Jo has been the perfect teacher for me – supportive, joyful, and patient. What she has given to me is a debt that I can never repay. What I know is that I must share what I have gained with others. I feel blessed to be her student.

**What are the next steps you envisage in enabling people to lead a complete life through yoga?**  
To help people realise that studying yoga does not just teach the student about yoga. Yoga not only develops core discipline and real life skills, it ultimately deepens one's commitment to be of service to humanity. I also believe that yoga is a movement of consciousness that holds the promise of saving the world. The task is to help people see yoga's breathtaking relevance to all aspects of both living and dying.

**There are many 'do it yourself' programmes and books on yoga today. What are the dangers, if any, of self-taught yoga?**  
I believe that everyone, at least for a period, requires a teacher. The subject is infinitely vast and guidance is essential to the process. I also believe that the teacher/student relationship is a fundamental aspect of yoga. At the end of the day, the teacher/student dynamic is as important in some respects as the knowledge itself. It creates a deeper level of integration within the student. While I think that there are dangers to not having a teacher, I also believe that without a teacher, a student's learning is incomplete.

**Did you, at any time, feel that the going was too tough and had almost given up? What made you persist in the effort?**  
I broke my femur bone while doing padmasana relatively early on in my yoga practice. That was a time when I serious-



*Mathew with his family*

ly entertained the question that perhaps yoga and paralysis were not a good mix. I had too many issues with my body and yoga might not be safe for me.

What made me persist is the truth that I felt within yoga, its hope, its clarity. It was not yoga's fault that I broke my leg. It was mine. I was the one who made the mistake. I now think of breaking my femur bone as an intense adjustment. I was practising too violently, beyond the limits of my body. I learned, beyond question, what non-violence means within the asana.

I tell my students that I broke my leg so they do not have to.

**Anything else you would like to share with our readers?**  
Yes. The fact that I can do yoga – that I can teach yoga to both 'abled' and 'disabled' students – that tells you something not about me but about yoga – the principles of yoga do not discriminate. They can travel through all mind-body relationships. I am honoured to say that I am a student of yoga. ☺

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