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Matthew Sanford:  
Embracing Your Whole Self

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## Connecting Mind and Body

BY ROXANNE FURLONG

**C**an you feel that sensation in your spine?" asks Matthew Sanford, after pressing on my sternum while I lean forward from my wheelchair, my hands pressed on a chair in front of me, breathing from the back of my rib cage. "Everybody has the ability to feel this sensation."

I'd just spent about an hour in one of Sanford's adaptive yoga classes at Courage Center in Golden Valley, Minn., in a dimly lit room. I was there to observe Sanford, a T4 para, and his students whom I'd interviewed for this piece. But with Sanford's enthusiasm and belief in the value of yoga for people with disabilities — and because of my curiosity — I was soon breathing deeply, feeling my sits bones, stretching through my spine, bringing my arms wide to release the stress of my day and feel the sensation in my tired, aching, atrophied muscles.

In this class, disabilities range from traumatic brain injury, MS and CP to paraplegia and quadriplegia. Usually there are enough volunteer assistants to help everyone transfer, but not tonight, so while some yogis transferred to the floor, others, including myself, practiced in our wheelchairs.

During the 90-minute class, Sanford adapted each move to each yogi's needs. One woman with paraplegia had an epiphany when she felt sensa-

tion in her spine. "Oh my, this is huge, this is huge," she whispered over and over.

I watched as Sanford went from yogi to yogi, detecting and announcing when they felt sensation in their spine. I can't say I felt anything special in my body other than the usual back kink and an urge to feel what others were feeling. The journalist in me wondered if the power of suggestion, coupled with Sanford's enthusiasm and each yogi's desire to feel, made their sensations real.

At the end of the class, Sanford instructed everyone to become comfortable. Those on the floor lay on their sides or back, some with their feet up on a chair, others with rolled-up blankets under their heads. Those of us in our chairs rested our hands in our laps or let them dangle; two students tilted their chairs to recline. We closed our eyes and for eight minutes listened to Sanford's gentle and encouraging voice as he slowly calmed and relaxed us, and bid us "Namasté."

## Making a Connection

Using adaptive yoga to transform trauma, loss and disability by awakening the mind-body connection, Sanford, 44, of Orono, Minn., is on a nationwide crusade to change the way we — and doctors, therapists and caregivers — view and use our bodies. Through his nonprofit, Mind Body Solutions, in Minnetonka, Minn., Sanford is training volunteers and instructors, with and without disabilities, to teach yoga as an approach to health and wholeness.

In 1978, at age 13, after Sanford was injured in a car accident that killed his father and sister, he was told by his doctors and therapists to forget about his legs. He became a "floating upper torso" until 25, when he began yoga and for the first time in 12 years felt sensation in his whole body when he "took his legs wide."

"When we become injured [or disabled], we stop living in parts of our body ... we're encouraged to," Sanford says. "When I took my legs wide, I felt sensation that I hadn't felt in 12 years." It's an altered sensation, of course: "What I now feel in my legs and in my paralyzed body is different from what I feel in my upper body."

"Our body never gives up. With every ounce of energy it has, it moves toward living," he says. "It will keep pumping blood from our heart, and if it has cancer and is growing the wrong cells, it will try to move

toward living. Your body stays faithful to living, it's your mind that waivers."

Sanford believes practicing yoga is an excellent way for individuals living with a disability to develop a mind-body relationship. Begin by feeling your whole body in the shower, he says; take your arms wide and your legs wide while lying in bed; place a bolster or pillow lengthwise beneath your back and let your chest open with gravity; feel more; breathe through your nose more.

"Try to feel rather than just 'overcome,'" he suggests. "That's the beginning of a mind-body practice ... it can happen in all different forms."

Sanford's been teaching adaptive and nonadaptive yoga since 1998 and founded Mind Body Solutions in 2001. He warns that the message we've been told — that our body is just an object that we wheel around — is a negative view of humanity; the key to living well is to learn to live more fully in our *entire* body.

Sanford explains the general misconception of yoga as being able to perform difficult and complicated physical movements that require extraordinary flexibility. Though rare in the U.S., there are some who make yoga into a religion. He doesn't push spirituality necessarily, but describes yoga as "increasing the quality of interaction between mind, body and whatever you want to call spirit."

"This is not about being able to grip the snot out of your poses, or to really work your muscles hard," he says. "It's learning to access deeper levels of experience within ordinary movement. Yoga is bringing more consciousness to movement rather than less. This is not going to make me walk again but allows me to experience as much aliveness and vibrancy in my entire body as is possible."

Sanford is not alone when he talks about the sensation and emotion he experienced when he took his legs wide. When Kevin Bjorklund, a 45-year-old, T4-complete para from Lakeville, Minn., had his yoga breakthrough, he cried all the way home from class.

## Finding a Deeper Self

Bjorklund was a 3-year-old farm kid when he became paralyzed during a tragic tractor mishap. He has memories of a spiritual, out-of-body experience of the accident when he went unconscious and stopped

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breathing after the tractor rolled over his skull. The muddy, soft spring ground saved Bjorklund from a crushed skull. His father revived him and saved his life.

"But I felt this peace and presence, which I think is our true nature," Bjorklund says. "It's what has helped me get through some tough times. I grew up with Swedish heritage, where you didn't analyze thoughts or talk about what you were going through, you just moved on. I had to bury a lot of my feelings."

In his late teens and early 20s, Bjorklund

began abusing drugs and alcohol, until he became sober in 2000. He says spirituality and going to meditation centers — moving away from religious aspects of his Presbyterian roots — is what has helped him remain sober.

"I knew there was a truth that seemed to be missing in a lot of what was taught and what I experienced," he says. "Everyone has to find their own way, and I just needed something deeper and truer that resonated more with me. It's about connecting to a deeper self, which is what I connected

to when I had that accident."

Meditation taught Bjorklund how to breathe, become still and quiet his mind. But meditation alone did not offer him the deeper awareness of a full-body practice. After 40 years of "dragging around" the lower part of his body, he attended a yoga class at Mind Body Solutions. The first time he got down onto a mat, he felt sensation in his whole body.

"I was taught by the medical community that there is no connection to your lower body, just to try to avoid pressure sores," he explains. "This is a very Western-medicine approach, and it doesn't take into account the biggest piece, the spiritual component, which can open your mind to many new things. It's very organic."

While sitting straight-legged on the mat that first time, Bjorklund was being helped by Sanford through a posture when a volunteer assistant gently pushed Bjorklund's feet forward.

"I had my eyes closed concentrating on my senses and breathing and had this faint sense of energy," he says. "I had a feeling of outline of my body beyond my waist. It was amazing."

"All it took was someone to help him realize that if he listens to his whole body,

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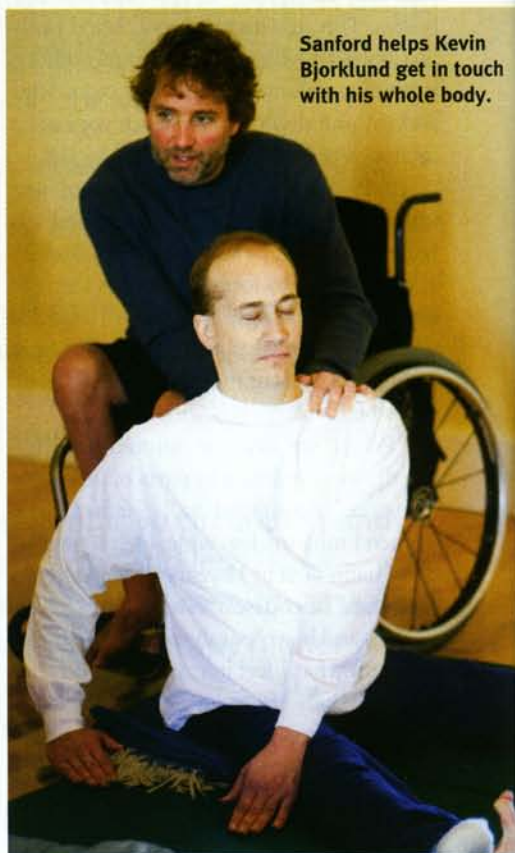
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Sanford helps Kevin Bjorklund get in touch with his whole body.

he will feel the sensation that is there," Sanford explains. "He was so young when he was injured, he doesn't remember that sensation and was never told to watch for it. I'm looking for health care that doesn't take someone like Kevin 42 years to feel his whole body."

## Rediscovering Mind-Body Energy

When practiced correctly, according to Sanford, yoga allows you to open your body energy and *chi* (the traditional Chinese "life force"). Bjorklund admits he can't physically feel sensations due to his SCI, but says this feeling is a different level, like a light pulse sensation.

"It's like taking strings of Christmas lights and plugging them together," Bjorklund illustrates. "If you have one bad bulb, you have to replace the whole string. When the right string connects, each bulb works from the first to the last. All the energy works together and allows the whole connection to be made."

Bjorklund and Sanford explain that the assistance given by volunteers to each yogi is critical for those who have disabilities. They help by "referencing" with certain poses, be it raising and stretching a yogi's arm or leg, pressing on his knees or back or helping him into a pose.

"They can help you get your leg up in the air, stretch your arms farther than what you can stretch, or help you balance better," Bjorklund says. "They lend a crucial physical component, which also allows that connection to take place and allows energy to flow so you can feel that energy and remember it."

Bjorklund says his mind learns what that experience feels like and allows him to practice at home.

"Every time I feel this, I try to engage my mind and remember, so when I'm on my own at home and getting into that position, I can still remember back to that reference and bring that feeling back into my body on my own. Sometimes I can, sometimes I can't."

But that first night that he did feel his energy, on his 50-minute drive home, Bjorklund had tears running down his face from 42 years of holding back emotion, and from thinking about the future he now knew was his reality.

"I had such a feeling of gratitude and a tremendous feeling of hope, and about

possibilities," he says. "We're told so many stories as part of our rehab. Now people have a lot more opportunities to not hear about them as much as I did when I was growing up.

"But if I can feel my body, which I never believed possible, what does that mean? Does this mean I have the power to reconnect and feel my spinal cord on my own?" Bjorklund asks. "There are so many things we don't have a clue about. Feeling that energy — energy we all have — and feeling that power behind it and

not getting stuck in a negative place gives us limitless possibilities."

## Body Awareness and Pain

Sanford explains that if we try to think about movement just in terms of muscular action or presence in our body in terms of flexing or activating muscles, we're following the path right into our disability. Instead, yoga helps you think differently about your disability and its effect on your

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## A New Kind of Freedom

All the students I spoke with, including Becker, mentioned a moment of clarity with their body — a connection that convinced them to continue yoga.

"The first time I could feel my whole body, it was weird, I was like, Wow! I felt connected," Becker says. "Now I feel connected to my whole body at every class, and the classes are really therapeutic for me. I do yoga my own way and adapt it to me."

Becker says his favorite pose is the "cobra" pose. His mother, Rose, a volunteer assistant, puts a yoga belt around his middle as he lies flat on his stomach. She pulls gently while Becker pushes away. Another assistant stretches his arms wide, allowing Becker to hold the position while his body relaxes.

Courage Center and Sanford are studying mind-body sensation as a way to improve transfer and motor planning. By only using your arms, shoulders and upper body when you transfer, as taught in rehab, you are not learning a sustainable level of movement.

"When I take my arm over my head and stretch up, I balance my shoulder girdle, then visualize down to my sits bones, to my inner heels. When I get my shoulder balanced better, I feel my legs more," Sanford explains. "When I move more as a whole body, my mind is also connected both to my feet and my tailbone. When I reach over and swing my rear end to transfer, I'm moving not just my arms, but my mind is in my tailbone, my mind is in my feet, and the transfer gets more graceful, easier."

Sanford is working with Courage Center to teach residents that the more they are "in their whole body, including their feet" during transfers, the better their balance will become, and the more sustainable their whole body will be.

Asked about elite athletes who are trained to use only their upper body, Sanford says: "When athletes strap their legs under their [racing] chair, they basically become an upper body. To me that's a symbol of exactly what's wrong with division. These athletes are amazing, but unfortunately they're doing this as a consequence to the rest of their body; it will eventually wear out. But the good thing about yoga is it's been here 4,000 years — it will wait for you."

For those who don't think they can do yoga, Sanford offers these words of

encouragement:

"Living with a disability is itself an unbelievably spiritual practice, it's relentless. It never gives you a day off, yet you keep showing up."

The higher level of resiliency and patience that we've learned, he says, will help us in our quest for mind-body connection.

"Think of all the times you've had to arrange rides, all the times you've had to wait ... that patience will help you because yoga is about moving your mind-body relationship in a more graceful, more

nourishing and more conscious way. I'm working for this paradigm shift in how we view disability."

Joe Dailey, of Prior Lake, Minn., who sustained a C6-7 incomplete SCI in 2002, says it was bizarre to realize that the memory of the brain to nerve was possibly still viable. Now, he feels healthier and is able to transfer more easily because of his developing a mind-body relationship.

"I have a better understanding of how to use my body," Dailey says. "I've learned

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Sanford student Joe Dailey says he feels the best he has since his C6-7 injury.

that when I work out with weights, I can position my body in a way so I exercise better, with more benefit. I now concentrate my energy on different parts of my body, even those I can't physically move."

During Dailey's first night in Sanford's class, volunteers helped him sit on the floor, something he hadn't done since before his injury.

"I had not felt that good since my accident," he says. "Just getting out of my chair and being in contact with the floor again ... it made a phenomenal difference. Out

of this chair, I felt connected. We're never connected with the earth, we're always sitting in the chair."

Another quad in Sanford's class, Sammy Dros of Minnetonka, Minn., has seen a marked improvement in her breathing and speaking strength since beginning yoga two years ago. Volunteer assistants help the 23-year-old, C3-4 incomplete quad, to take her arms wide, stretch her legs and transfer her to the floor.

"Since starting this class, I feel more complete," Dros says. "You forget about your body. Now I realize how important it is to stay present in my body, how it affects other things."

When an assistant presses her knees, she imagines that feeling. Believing in it helps her to feel sensation.

"I don't feel as limited by my disability now," she says. "I may not be able to move, but I now have this mind-body connection."

"When Sammy accesses that internal awareness, she breathes better, her resiliency increases," Sanford explains. "When she first came, her voice was really low and soft. Your diaphragm needs a feeling of stability and calmness in order to project your voice. By helping Sammy to feel her sits bones, it allows her to breathe better and extend her presence throughout her whole body."

But can the power of suggestion create a desire in us to feel, thereby offering a "sensation" in our brain?

"If I tell you to push down through your sits bones, push down through your feet and push out through the top of your head, and the mind activates presence through the body, it actually happens. It doesn't happen as muscular action," Sanford says. "If your brain lights up in a way as if your body is stretching down to your feet, then it's not just suggestion anymore."

"I know with every fiber of my being that the mind-body approach to trauma loss and disability is the best way to recover," Sanford explains. "All I'm trying to do is create a story that moves piles of money into this type of approach [away from the medical model]. I already know it's true. Deepening the mind-body connection isn't going to make people walk again. It's not going to reverse their condition. It's going to teach them how to move through their mind-body relationship in a way that's more freeing, more graceful, and therefore improves the functional movement in their life."

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## Taking his Mission Wide

Sanford's goal is to spread throughout the country a rehabilitation process where people leave rehab more connected to their body, rather than less.

"It's common sense that if I'm more connected with my body, I'm going to take care of it better," he says. "I've been paralyzed for 30 years, and one thing we know about any SCI or permanent disability is that it never goes away, it's relentlessly persistent."

For 10 years Sanford had been trying to convince Courage Center to teach the mind-body connection. It took the publication of his book, *Waking*, and the general public's acceptance of holistic medicine, for the center to adapt Sanford's system. He believes teaching caregivers the mind-body approach allows them to teach and apply the techniques to their clients. He has retrained 46 Courage Center therapists in the mind-body model, and through Mind Body Solutions will be releasing instructional materials in the upcoming months, including a six-week course of adaptive yoga.

"Our culture, to its credit, is invested in

better wheelchairs, better adaptive equipment, more curb cuts, better prosthetics, better adaptive sports," he says. "If we can show that a mind-body approach is what will help people recover the best, it will help everybody."

Asked how the mind-body approach bodes with doctors of medicine, Sanford says many have been open to it, adding, "It's not *if* a mind-body approach enters our health-care system, it's *when* and *how*."

Sanford is also speaking to VA hospitals about the mind-body approach to help veterans with physical and emotional disabilities such as post-traumatic stress disorder.

"People have to realize that their injury or disability is fundamentally a mind-body injury," he explains. "My spine was broken when a car bumped over my chest, but that's not the injury I live with every day. Clearly, I have a physical injury, but I also have emotional and psychological implications in my injury. The injury I live with every day is a more difficult mind-body relationship."

During our phone conversation, before we met, Sanford described a yoga move to develop my mind-body relationship.

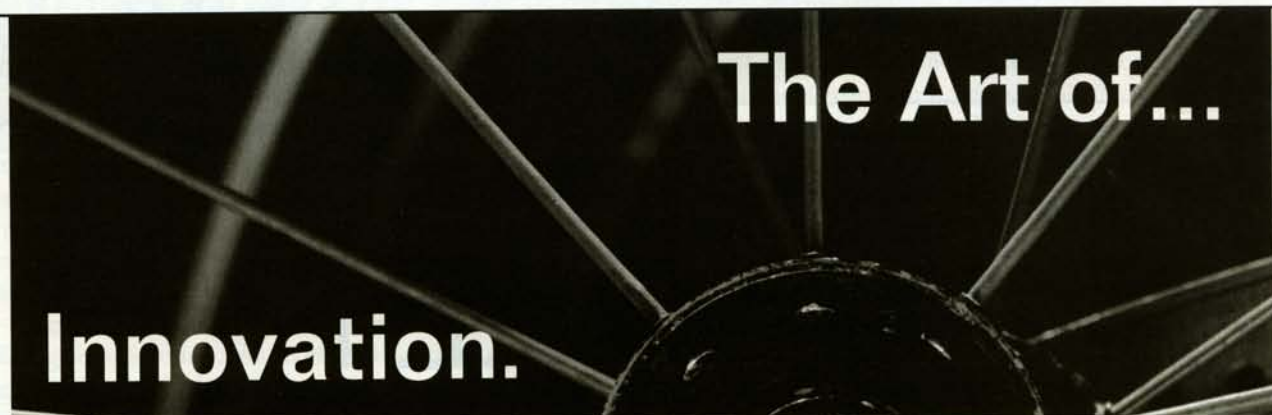


Rubinstein Photo 2009

Unbeknownst to him, I have difficulty breathing because of muscle weakness in my chest and lungs. What he taught me in passing, I use every day now, while working at my computer, (usually) slumped in my chair. This easy practice helps me breathe more deeply, evenly and clearly: "Lift your chest ... and breathe ... feel or imagine your sits bones ... imagine or press down through your feet ... and breathe."

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