



## **Biographical Interview with Matthew Sanford**

### **Waking starts with the car accident that paralyzed you...tell us a little about that?**

It was twenty-eight years ago. I was thirteen, and my father and sister were killed. I got pretty banged up – broke my back, severed my spinal cord, broke my neck and both wrists. One of my lungs filled with fluid, and I sustained an injury to my pancreas that shut down my digestive system for nearly two months.

People often wonder if there was alcohol involved with the accident, something that could explain or be blamed for such a horrific event. There wasn't. It was a one-car accident, caused by preferential icing, the first wave of ice that forms near bridges and overpasses. The day of our accident was the Sunday after Thanksgiving in 1978. It was 32 degrees and lightly raining. My dad pulled out into the left lane to pass. We lost traction, slid across the freeway and down a steep embankment.

I didn't leave the hospital until June of the following year.

### **How did your life bring you to yoga.... obviously very few people living with a spinal cord injury make such a choice, especially back in 1991 before the yoga fad?**

I had a charmed beginning. The first teacher I met – Jo Zukovich from San Diego, CA – was remarkable. She possessed an amazing balance of yogic knowledge and compassion. I remember the first time we met each other. It was new territory for both of us. She had never taught a paraplegic, and I had obviously never done yoga. But from the first time we made eye contact, it was love at first purpose. We explored how yoga might travel through a paralyzed body together, as teacher and student, but also as friends. As *Waking* conveys, yoga stirred up a lot of the old trauma in me. Without Jo's caring patience, I doubt that I would have continued.

Even before I met Jo, my life had been pointing me toward yoga; I was a kid who loved being in his body. I was quite an athlete, even for a thirteen-year-old. More than that, I was a fun-loving boy who loved to roll around, wrestle, hang upside-down, climb trees

and so on. The conventional way of living in a wheelchair did not satiate this love. Unfortunately, it took me twelve years to figure this out.

Second, by the time I came to yoga, I was at a saturation point. I was living only tangentially connected to my paralyzed body. I was unhappy and beginning to have rotator cuff problems – the result of poor posture and using my arms so much. I needed to find a way to reconnect to my WHOLE body. I was particularly open to yoga because my father practiced some at home when I was little. I was about five and used to watch him move his body into these strange, mysterious positions before he went to work in the morning. It must have made an impression.

A third factor had to do with my experience in graduate school. I was studying philosophy at the University of California at Santa Barbara with a focus on consciousness and the mind-body problem. I vaguely knew that my unique experience with trauma gave me special insight into these subjects. Unfortunately, I met with some serious resistance to my approach. It was then that the absurdity of what I was doing struck me right between the eyes. There I was, arguing abstractly about minds and bodies and consciousness, and, quite frankly, I had no idea what those things were. I was living in the proverbial ivory tower.

So I left graduate school and began to study yoga. I came to believe, and still do, that the mind-body problem is a practical problem, not an academic one. I believe it is the most pressing issues facing our consciousness in this coming century. The upshot is that yoga became the fieldwork for my study of minds, bodies, and consciousness. In some loose sense, *Waking* is the dissertation that I never wrote...but I promise you, it is a much better read.

### **What made you think a paralyzed person could do yoga poses that typically require a fully functional body?**

The short answer is that I did not start yoga in hopes of doing full-bodied poses. I was simply looking for ways to reconnect to my abandoned paralyzed body. I wasn't looking to do standing poses or inversions or radical backbends. I just wanted to feel more...feel more within my body. What better place to start than a four thousand year-old discipline that unifies mind, body, and spirit.

The practical breakthrough was to not expect yoga to produce miraculous results. It was accepting and staying open to whatever it produced – little or small, subtle or loud. This led to a crucial healing realization. There is a whole realm of healing potential within the mind-body relationship that does not require a reversal of condition. In my particular case, this means there is healing other than healing to walk again.

This is one of the simple realizations that runs through everything I do, whether it be teaching yoga to people with or without disabilities, speaking within corporations about stress, speaking about the aging process, consciousness, or transitioning into adulthood.

The quality of presence that we experience within our mind-body relationship truly matters. When we refine it, wonderful things happen.

### **How do you actually do yoga poses?**

The same way as everyone else does, except that the final pose might look different when it moves through my mind-body relationship. The instructions are the same as if I wasn't paralyzed. The difference is that I might not have access to the necessary muscle flexion to carry all of them out. For example, in a seated pose that aims to make the student realize a connection between lifting the chest and pressing the thighs down into the floor, I obviously cannot physically press my thighs down. That's when I have to get creative. I have to see, intuit, feel, visualize, anything you can imagine to experience a level of connection. Over time and with lots of practice, other layers of connection between mind and body begin to appear, ones that are less physical, more energetic. This subtler kind of connection will eventually happen in any student's poses – it is part of yogic realization. The breakthrough in my yoga is that this occurs even though I am paralyzed.

### **How did *Waking* come to fruition?**

One could argue that the idea to write a book began while I was still in the hospital at age thirteen. I remember my mother telling me that I might write a book someday about my experiences. She even got a book out of the library called *Easy Walking* and shared some of it with me as an example.

*Waking* did have a predecessor though. At the time, it was called *Rolling Into My Body*. I started writing it in about 1998. My wife and I had just built a fully accessible house, and I had begun teaching yoga to people with disabilities. I had been practicing yoga for seven years and was ready to start giving back, so I wrote a few chapters and a book proposal. Truth be told, I had a lot I needed to learn about writing. Still, the proposal garnered some interest from a literary agent, but she wanted to make it a self-help book – I didn't have the stomach for that. The end result was that I tabled *Rolling Into My Body* and set out to become a better writer.

The actual catalyzing event, however, that began what would lead to *Waking* was witnessing the birth of my two sons. In fact, its description is the final chapter of the book. It happened in February 2000. In June of the same year, I signed up for my first and only writing workshop. My son Paul is now seven and has become the living time-marker of my first book.

### **Why did you write *Waking*?**

Because I have something to say, something that I want to share. But I needed to figure out how to tell a story first, how not to write in the boring writing voice that I learned while studying academic philosophy. I want people to feel what I am saying, not just

think it. So I set out to write a page-turning story that elevates our awareness of the mind-body connection. My goal is to move readers to think not just about my experiences, but to also ‘feel’ their own.

There is a quote I heard from Hemingway, “The world breaks everyone. Some people are just stronger in the broken places.” Life isn’t easy. Mine certainly hasn’t been. But what does it mean to be stronger in the broken places? I believe it means adopting an attitude of a seeker, of letting one’s life – whatever it may be – be full of wonder and possibility. This is true regardless of how much one has lost.

One of the feelings I try to convey in *Waking* is that my family was an ordinary family. I was an ordinary kid. So often people imagine that my story is one of overcoming the events of my life, of overcoming my disability. This is exactly wrong. If my life had not happened as it did, I would not be who I am. I could have just as easily been an insurance salesman, who loved his family and played softball once a week. It is because of my experiences, not in spite of them, that I am who I am.

The message of *Waking* is that being “stronger in the broken places” means opening to one’s life, to one’s experiences. I could not have written *Waking* if I had set out to prove something or someone wrong. I do not practice yoga to prove how mistaken the medical model was about my condition. I practice and teach yoga BECAUSE I am paralyzed, BECAUSE my paralysis has opened a window into both the mind-body relationship and the nature of our consciousness.

If my story is inspirational, I hope it is because I stayed open to my life. I stayed open despite a preponderance of loss.

### **Who is your intended audience?**

Anyone with a mind and a body. My story in *Waking* is just an extreme example of what happens when mind becomes separated from body – an experience that we all share in greater and lesser degrees. Most importantly, it tells a practical story about the potential that waits for all of us within the mind-body relationship.

We have minds. We have bodies. They work better together. I believe this is a truth that everyone needs, whether you are old or young, whether you are going through a hard time, or just trying to bring a measure of calm into your busy life. Who doesn’t need a story that brings to life such a simple insight?

### **You are married and have a son, tell us a little about that?**

I re-met Jennifer at our ten-year high school reunion. We had been friends throughout middle school and senior high. I even kissed her in tenth grade and then during our freshman year of college. But then we lost touch and met anew at the reunion.

During our first date, Jennifer had quite a come-on line. She told me that, of all the men she had known, I was the one who possessed the best genetic material to create an offspring. As a young girl, Jennifer had always imagined that she needed to have a child before the age of thirty - with or without a husband. As she was twenty-eight and without a significant relationship, she was amusing herself thinking of 'suitable' donor candidates. I was apparently the front-runner in the imagined sweepstakes.

The irony was that just the week before I was informed by my urologist, a pioneer in male fertility, that he had made a breakthrough in helping spinal cord injured males biologically father children. Up until that point, I had come to accept that I would never produce children – that is what I was told when I was first injured. So when Jennifer made reference to the splendor of my genetic material, I was a little stunned.

A little more than two years later, we were married. We did finally get pregnant with the aid of in-vitro fertilization and now have a son named Paul. We are a grateful, happy family.

### **Being a parent is hard enough, what is it like being a parent and getting around in a wheelchair?**

Being a parent has ensured purpose in my life. No matter what else I do, whether *Waking* becomes a bestseller, whether my message resonates for a wider audience, it matters not. The purpose of my life is guaranteed – all I have to do is be the very best father that I can be. I get to help another human being step into the world. There is nothing more awesome, nothing more important.

It may be that I have an extraordinary son – of course I think so – but being Paul's father has been amazingly seamless. Of course, there are things that I wish I could do with him – toss him high into the air, carry him on my shoulders, or walk with him in the woods. But honestly, we have found an amazing groove, our own way of doing things, of playing ball, of wrestling. He rides on my lap, races me down the hall, and waits for me to come home through the door. We go to hockey games, play nerf basketball, and share a not-so-secret love of root beer. Being a disabled parent has its hard moments; but like most everything else in life, it works itself out.

### **Do you have any advice for someone living with a disability?**

Stay in your body, stay present. It matters. The quality of life depends upon it. This is the same advice I would give to anyone, regardless of one's level of ability. It is the insight that led to *Waking*. We all live and die within an ever-changing mind-body relationship. Pay attention, even if it seems ordinary. There is so much more waiting for us to realize.