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“There can be no real individual freedom in the presence of economic insecurity.”

— Chester Bowles (1901 - 1986)

Access Press

Feeling the body I have

Matthew Sanford talks about adapted yoga for people with disabilities

by Clarence Schadegg

Last month, we reported that Minnesotan Matthew Sanford, a paraplegic, has been nominated as one of the nation's top 40 heroes in the 6th Annual Volvo for Life Award for his pioneering work with yoga.

During a recent interview, Sanford shared some of his insights with *Access Press*.

How is the yoga you teach different from that of other yoga practitioners?

I teach adaptive yoga and we don't use the full range of poses. I have accessed and learned from a smaller number of poses, to find the very basic core of each pose. Also, I use more props and it looks a little different.

What is the type of yoga you practice?

The type of yoga I practice is called Iyengar yoga. It emphasizes alignment and precision more than other yogas. Iyengar yoga, in particular, breaks the poses down into smaller pieces. Yoga is a phenomenon that occurs at the intersection of your mind's intent and your body's limits. The essence of yoga is action that is occurring in the mind-body connection.

Does yoga re-channel chronic pain?

MindBody Solutions, our non-profit, is helping people transform the experience of pain and trauma in their lives. When people experience pain they typically move out of their



Since 1998, Matthew Sanford has been teaching a weekly adaptive yoga class for people living with a wide range of disabilities at Courage Center. A student of Sanford's for eight years, Allison Locey (pictured) has cerebral palsy and says the class has changed how she feels and lives in her body.

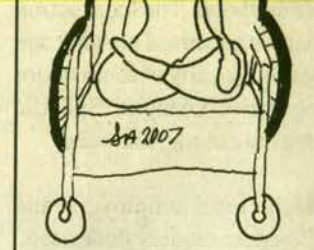
body. They draw away from the pain. If you have chronic pain you often vacate that part of your body, and eventually that's going to make the pain even worse. Yoga will help you learn to move and distrib-

ute your presence more equally throughout your body. It is a great way to manage chronic pain. Someone who experiences chronic pain may end up developing fear and anxiety from it. The focus of their mental awareness is on the pain they are about to experience. Developing a mind-body practice, you can distribute your

awareness and when you're in pain you can begin to distribute it more equally and tolerate it easier. Everybody needs to develop a more subtle mind-body connection because it improves quality-of-life.

How do you work with a client?

We have now started a pilot program where Courage Center is on a path to become a holistic rehabilitation leader, using the mind-body approach. If you leave our health care system more aware of your entire body presence, you're less likely to come back with secondary conditions. The more present you are in your body the better you will be able to move throughout your life. (The rehab professionals also need to be more present in their own bodies. They need to study the mind-body relationship in order to understand and guide others.)



One of my students at Courage Center, a paraplegic who was injured very young, doesn't remember ever walking. After one class, he said, "I drove home that night weeping." He learned how to feel his whole body. He never knew it was possible for him to feel the presence of his legs. He has now become one of my best students. He totally gets it. Envision a system where it doesn't take years to feel the presence in your paralyzed body. When I started reporting sensation in the hospital, they knew my spinal cord was damaged and it was never going to heal. They went strictly to the psychological component of the injury. They were worried that I wasn't going to accept the permanence of my injury, so they told me stories: the whole "phantom feeling" stories, that I should just for-
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Yoga - Cont. from p. 4

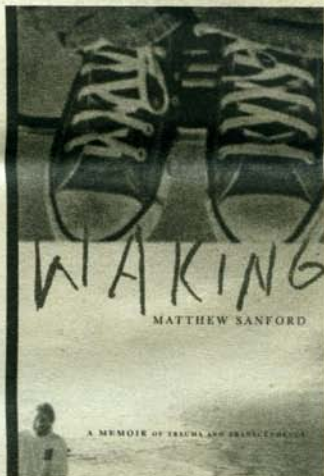
get about my paralyzed body parts. That was the treatment. The real injury was a mind-body injury.

How did your hospital experiences influence your decision to learn, practice and teach yoga to people with disabilities?

One of the things I try to say when public speaking is that the violence that I sustained and survived didn't stop at the accident; it began. Some of the corrective violence I went through (which you heard about in *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence*, my recently published book, which is coming out in paperback in June) was well-intended, and it saved my life. When you're having surgery, just because you're asleep, doesn't mean your body doesn't absorb the violence of being cut open. That's part of the message we need to get out. Rehabilitation is subtly but essentially violent. You're working hard. You're trying to restore your life. There needs to be more nonviolent mind-body experiences in the hospital. Not everything is push, pull, yank, yank, pull; but it needs to be a balanced experience. There are ways to teach balance. Breathing helps a lot with perception; it helps you feel where you are in space, helps you feel your body. Those types of things need to be part of the rehabilitative experience.

Where do you teach yoga?

I'm teaching the adaptive yoga class once a week at Courage Center. I'm also training teachers to teach this class, so that



we can expand our adaptive yoga program. We are designing a program that is going to change the way rehabilitation is delivered, and improve the outcomes.

Do you have any final thoughts you would like us to know?

Through yoga, I have gained a MIND-BODY insight that transforms the experience of living. I'm not a Yoga teacher because I overcame my disability. I'm a Yoga teacher because I have altered my mind-body relationship. This is the message our culture doesn't totally get. This is the message I want to get out to everybody who lives with a disability.

We get so much pressure to *overcome* our disabilities. And often, it's at the expense of being present and feeling whole. I want to be in the body I have. I want to feel the body I have. I know good things will happen when I'm in the present. Anxiety will change. Depression will change. A whole bunch of things will change. ■