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Insights

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Into Spina Bifida®



A Whole Person

Experiencing the Body-Mind Connection

Self Acceptance

It's OK to be Different

Finding Freedom

From Domestic Abuse

Toward Wholeness

Re-connecting the Body and Mind



Photo provided by Rubinstein Photo

Matthew Sanford emphasizes the mind-body connection in his yoga classes for those with and without disabilities.

Insets: Yoga student Kevin Bjorklund with members of his immediate and extended families.

Seated on a mat in a brightly lit yoga studio, Kevin Bjorklund of Minneapolis, Minn., stretches both his mind and his body. Responding to the touch of an assistant, Kevin quiets his mind, allowing himself to connect with the small pulses of energy he can sense flowing up and down his spine. His awareness of that energy has been growing, and will someday lead to awareness of the legs he cannot remember feeling. Injured in an accident at age 3, Kevin has lived most of his 46 years paralyzed from the chest down.

"I've lived most of my life an 'upper-body person,'" says Kevin. "My lower body was just something I dragged around, never really feeling entirely connected. Through yoga I've come to experience myself as a whole person—I don't view myself as disabled anymore, but as the whole person that I am."

Kevin's yoga instructor, Matthew Sanford, is uniquely qualified to lead Kevin through his journey toward wholeness. A devastating car accident that took the lives of his father and sister left Matthew similarly paralyzed at the age of 13. "Like Kevin, I was encouraged to disconnect from my lower body, to concern myself with its maintenance only," Matthew remembers. "After the accident I told the doctors that I could feel a humming, a buzz, in my lower body. They told me it wasn't real and that it would fade. Thirty-one years later I am helping others to re-discover that energy, that life, in their own bodies."

For 12 years Matthew believed his well-meaning doctors, at one point feeling that he may as well amputate his legs since they were "useless" to him. But in 1991 he took a leave of absence from the graduate program in which he was studying philosophy. He felt an overwhelming need to focus more attention on taking care of his body. Nor long after, he began studying with Jo Zukovich, an Iyengar yoga practitioner. From his very first session, Matthew felt a new energetic awareness that took him by surprise. Jo had no experience working with people with disabilities, but she and Matthew explored the possibilities together.

Body as Teacher

"The mind teaches the body, and the body teaches the mind," Matthew affirms. "We don't tend to believe the body has much to say, but if we listen, it will tell us that our asymmetrical way of sitting or walking is wearing on our joints. It will help us to discover new ways to do things we thought we couldn't do. It will lead us to a place of wholeness and mind-body connection that we would have thought impossible."

In the three years that Kevin has worked with Matthew, he has experienced that body teaching. Through his training in yoga, he has shifted his focus from what is wrong with his body, to what works well—what is healthy. And he has become more physically able to contend with the travel required in his job as a product sales consultant for a global company.

"The physical benefits of yoga are enormous," says Matthew. "Just reclaiming what your body feels like in space brings a sense of wholeness." Many of Matthew's students have found that re-connecting with the paralyzed parts of them has imparted new abilities. Transfers are easier, balance is improved, and ability to manage pain is enhanced. "Yoga has made me more flexible, stronger," says one of Matthew's students. "Before yoga, I didn't think to use my legs to help me transfer out of my wheelchair. Now I push down on them and transferring is easier." Another student, a marathon runner before injury left him a quadriplegic, observes, "There's an incredible feeling you have when you finish a marathon. Through yoga, I've felt that way again for the first time since my injury."



Photo courtesy of HDMG

Matthew's touch helps Kevin to place his limbs in space and experience himself as a whole person.

Emotional and Spiritual Benefits

The benefits go beyond the physical. "I am more content," Kevin says. "More at peace with who I am. Yoga has helped me to put aside the denial, shame, and negative emotion that I associated with my disability. In an adaptive yoga class it takes humility, courage, and vulnerability to accept the help of the volunteers—to allow their touch. But the resulting experience has been hugely rewarding to me."

Many people with a disability feel that their body has betrayed them—let them down in some way. Matthew believes the body will always move toward life. It's the mind that falters. "Your body is the best home your mind will ever have," he says. "It's doing the best it can with the cards it was dealt. It's the mind that loses faith and struggles to see health and vibrancy in the body."

Though Matthew's mind has no memory of the accident, his body remembers. When he first began studying yoga, he started having flashbacks. Now he knows exactly how his injuries occurred. "The mind-body relationship is fundamental," Matthew emphasizes. "We must let the body have its voice. If we can re-establish that mind-body connection, healing is possible even when curing is not."

Matthew Sanford is the founder of Mind Body Solutions, a public speaker, and author of *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence*. He teaches both mainstream and adaptive yoga classes in the Minneapolis area.

For more information, visit matthewsanford.com and mindbodysolutions.org.