

YOUR ULTIMATE TWIN CITIES GUIDE

METRO

TWIN CITIES METROPOLITAN 05/07

5 GREAT NEW RESTAURANTS

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METRO STIRS UP THE PERFECT MN COCKTAIL RECIPES: PG 46



FITNESS



GETCONNECTED

1. MATTHEW SANFORD

matthewsanford.com

Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence, by Matthew Sanford, Rodale, 2006

2. MIND BODY SOLUTIONS

17516 Minnetonka Blvd.
Minnetonka
952-473-3700
info@mindbody
solutions-mn.org

THE LESSONS OF LIMITATION

EXCEPTIONAL YOGI MATTHEW SANFORD CONNECTS STUDENTS' MINDS AND BODIES. BY SUSAN GAINES

When Matthew Sanford rolls into the bursting morning light of his Minnetonka yoga studio, it is with the grace and confidence of a man who is absolutely at home in his own body. Rather than acting as the unfortunate prop of a paraplegic, his wheelchair moves as an extension of him. But there's little time to marvel at his agility with the chair before the smile on his face grabs you. It is a smile he was born with, he says, one that has endured through trauma and loss. And one that greets the students gathering for his Monday-morning class.

"I'm one of the lucky ones," he says about this tendency to smile. Left paraplegic at the age of 13 in a car accident that killed his father and sister, Sanford, now 41, is not a yoga teacher because he has overcome his disability. Rather, "My disabilities have forced me to deeply explore the mind-body connection," he says.

Sanford chronicles his journey in his memoir, *Waking: A Story of Trauma and Transcendence*. He imparts these lessons through Mind Body Solutions, a non-profit organization that includes his Minnetonka yoga studio, a workplace program call "Bring Your Body to Work" and numerous national speaking engagements based on the revolutionary yet common-sense idea: "Minds and bodies work better together."

Disability has been "an essential teacher" for Sanford, and he offers its lessons to his students, disabled and able-bodied alike. "My story, what it's like to sit in the darkness and move through it, is a story for us all," says Sanford.

Sanford, who has a graduate degree in philosophy, imparts these lessons in practical packages, words

to accompany physical postures. Sanford knows that for most of us, the able-bodied, connecting our minds to our bodies begins with the physical. We learn about "energy" and we feel what Sanford calls "presence through the body." Sanford wheels around our mats, correcting our postures, or *asanas*, with a gentle hand placed just so. He invites us to believe in what we cannot see, to believe that by focusing on a place at the back of the heart, for example, we can release tension in the groin.

This belief, grounded in a 5,000-year yogic tradition, taught Sanford to listen to a body that had been, since the age of 13, lost to him from the chest down. "I used to feel like a floating torso," he told me later. This disconnect between body and mind

may have been an unconscious survival tactic, and Sanford acknowledges actively trying to disassociate from his body to avoid the pain caused not only by the original accident, but also by the countless medical procedures that followed. The rehabilitation model of the day held that phantom feelings can lead to false hopes about walk-

ing again, and he ought to forget about having a meaningful connection between his mind and paralyzed body.

For Sanford, however, this mind-body dislocation was slowly killing him. By tapping into the "silence" from the inside of the lower two thirds of his body, he was able to heal his mind and find the practical benefits that yoga offers to anyone: balance, strength and flexibility. Through yoga practice, he has learned "to spread presence throughout the body," he says. "I can feel my legs, just not in the way you feel them. I feel a sense of presence, a sense of flow and energy in my whole body."

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I focus on my breath, the stream of energy that moves from my heel to my fingertips, and on the sound of Sanford's voice as he talks about yoga: the way the body is a channel for our breath, the way that turning our gaze to meet the ceiling ought to be a consequence of the rotation of our spine. *Channel, service, consequence.* I make subtle adjustments.

The next time I hear his voice, Sanford is out of his chair sitting on his mat before us. As he guides us through a seated posture, my focus draws me back into my own body. The next time he speaks, he is back in his chair wheeling around our mats. Only later does it dawn on me that though Sanford was in and out of his chair several times, I never once saw him make this transfer; what had once been for him an "arduous and graceless act" now is silent and smooth.

Tapping into the mind-body connection is what gives Sanford the wholeness evident when he rolls into the room. It is also the energy that, Sanford believes, can save us all from the personal and societal ills caused by the disconnection of mind from body. By becoming aware of this disjunction, whether it's caused by injury, illness or an insanely busy lifestyle, we can become healed in unexpected and profound ways. "But you have to change your criteria of success," he says. "It's a whole different way of seeing."

And sometimes, this way of seeing is harder to acquire for the able-bodied. Without physical limitations, it's easy to miss the "rabbit hole," Sanford says to describe the tremendous depth of yoga practice. "That's what I'm in love with," says Sanford, "how deep the rabbit hole goes." +

Susan Gaines, who has taken classes with Sanford at his Minnetonka studio, believes that the body holds our greatest potential for transformation: physical, mental and spiritual. If we listen, it can teach us everything, from play to prayer. Comments, questions or suggestions about her fitness column? Email her at: susan.gaines@metromag.com.