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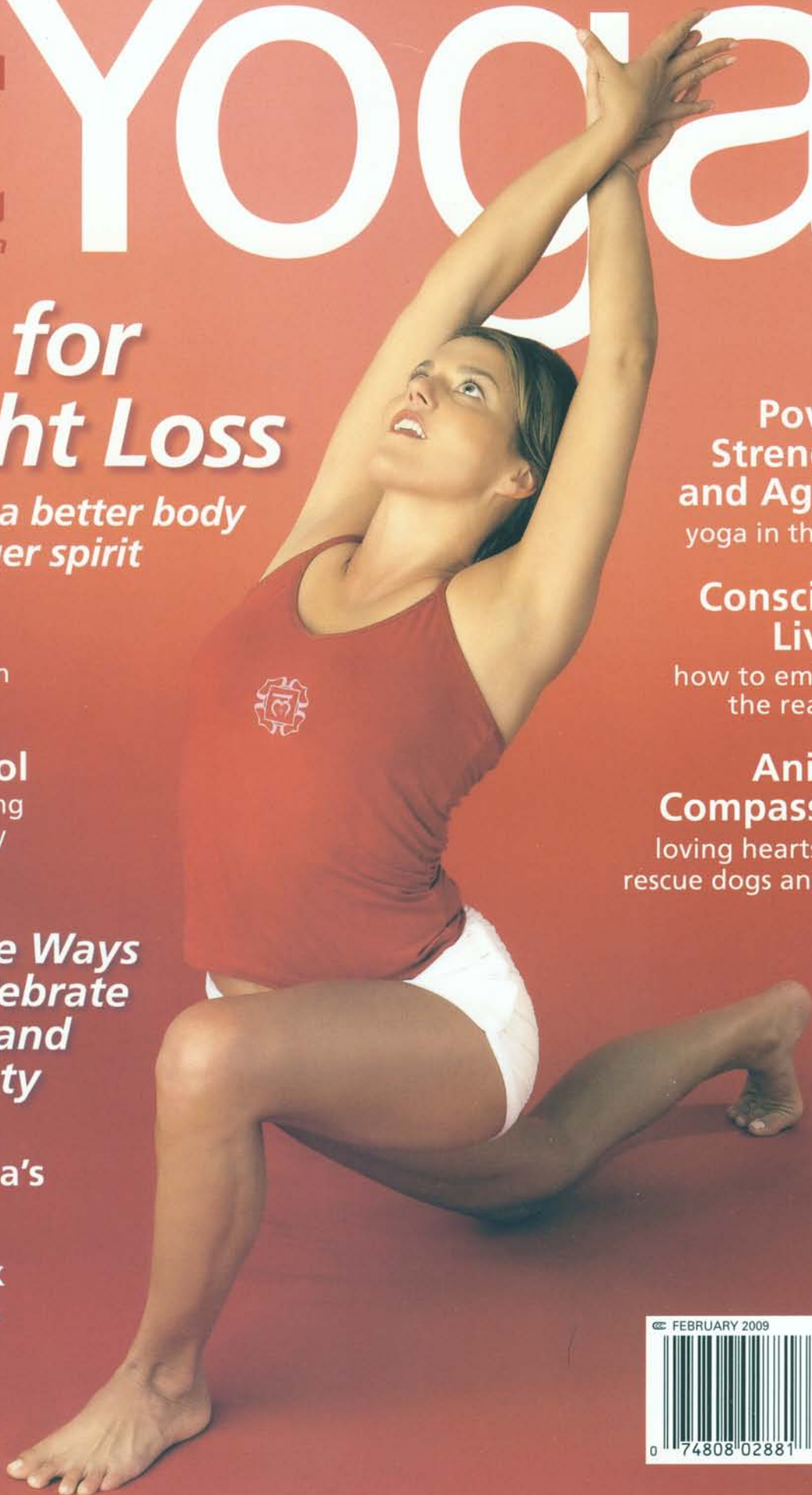
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# The Courage to Feel

Matthew Sanford talks about yoga, disability,  
and the mind-body relationship

by Sara Avant Stover



**O**n a cold and misty Sunday afternoon in 1978, Matthew Sanford and his family were driving home from a Thanksgiving weekend in Kansas City, Missouri. Sanford, then 13, was asleep in the backseat when their car crossed a bridge, skidded on a patch of ice, and toppled down a steep embankment. Three-and-a-half days later, he woke up from a coma to learn that his life as he had known it was over. Both his father and sister were dead, and he was paralyzed from the chest down.

The days and years that followed became a bumpy journey of healing. Ultimately, yoga led him to reconnect the vast schism that this trauma cast between his body and mind. Now a yoga teacher, motivational speaker, author of *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence*, and founder of the non-profit organization, Mind Body Solutions, Sanford teaches audiences of all abilities on the importance of connecting to one's body.

Over lunch at a sidewalk café in Boulder, Colorado, Matthew shared his insights on how we can enter more deeply into yoga and the gift of simply feeling alive.

**Fit Yoga:** *Being paralyzed from the chest down and navigating through life in a wheelchair, your approach to yoga is non-conventional, to say the least. Can you tell us more about it?*

**Matthew Sanford:** There are many, many paths to yoga. There are many ways to achieve a realization, movement, or flow with prana (or life force). What you experience with me when I'm teaching is that it's possible for prana to move without muscular action.

That's a mindbender for a student of vinyasa (or flow) yoga, where the practice is so muscle-oriented. Sure, when you couple the muscle connection with the movement, breath, and rhythm of vinyasa yoga, you end up with a similar thing to what I am teaching and experiencing.

But what if you're like me and that's just not possible? As yoga has to grow and will grow, we need to have open-

ings, or portals, for all different abilities. And that's part of what my story and my approach illuminate.

**FY:** *How do students initially react when they learn that you are a teacher?*

**MS:** My story, and the fact that I'm a yoga teacher, presents pretty much any yoga student with a disorienting dilemma.

Right off the bat they ask, "You do poses?" They can't quite get their heads around it.

So, I ask them, "What if you didn't have access to the repetitive performance and high variety of poses? What would yoga be in this case, when it's not just mindfulness or meditation either? How can there still be a

physically vibrant, active experience in yoga?"

**FY:** *Questions I'd like to know the answer to, too.*

**MS:** Prana moves even more through the bones than it does through the

muscles. It's just in the muscles that you get to control it more. The muscles are just trying to activate the bones. So, you have to let muscular strength not be what leads the pose.

**FY:** *If you can't teach about the movement of prana through flowing yoga sequences and muscular engagement, how do you get students to experience it?*

**MS:** I try to help people see that each pose has a sense of direction. Mr. Iyengar said something in *Tree of Yoga* that profoundly affects my yoga practice: You only need two things for a yoga pose: a center of gravity and a sense of direction. He doesn't mention muscular action.

That is one reason Iyengar uses props. He is actually helping to direct prana so you can see in what direction it moves, without muscular effort, in each pose. He's trying to show you the way the pose is supposed to feel when you're flexible and strong enough to do it on your own.

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## The Courage to Feel

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**FY:** Much like you are doing when you teach what you call “adaptive” yoga to individuals living with disabilities?

**MS:** Yes, I’m trying to make yoga more practical. In some ways, I’m not even teaching anything. I am just asking you to feel what is already there.

And it’s not that I discovered or am creating something new. I’m just utilizing subtle connections of the mind-body relationship that aren’t as important for you to realize when you don’t need to because you don’t have disabilities.

**Eventually, you won’t be able to practice yoga as hard as you do now. That doesn’t make you any less. You are simply evolving, and you have to shift.**

**FY:** What was the breakthrough that led you to feel these subtle connections?

**MS:** First, the big breakthrough could come when I started yoga without thinking it would allow me to walk again. I let whatever it brought be what it brought.

**FY:** And what was that?

**MS:** I no longer felt like just an upper torso. I began to feel a sense of presence and direction in my body. This is so lacking to someone with a disability. You know, when you get injured, you don’t have a sense of direction in that part of your body anymore.

It brought the realization that the paralysis is a sensation that can be worked with like anything else.

Before I started yoga, I didn’t feel alive in my ankles and my feet. It was just empty. And now it’s all just

right here. But doesn’t that happen to everyone who practices yoga? Every benefit I’m getting is really what everyone gets. It’s just more apparent in me because of the loss that it’s coming through.

**FY:** Is this what allows you to relate to all types of students?

**MS:** Yes. I’m just trying to get people in touch with the sensation of existence.


The world doesn’t need me to do more complicated asanas. The world needs me to tell my story because it changes one’s attachment to the physical.

Maybe you don’t have to do 108 Sun Salutations. Some days, you might want to, but you’re not doing any less yoga when you don’t. This is especially important considering that we’re all aging. Eventually, you won’t be able to practice yoga as hard as you do now. That doesn’t make you any less. You are simply evolving, and you have to shift.

I’m trying to draw attention to the mind-body relationship; and yoga, I think, is the best way to explore it.

**FY:** What are some other ways to explore this?

**MS:** Feel your body. Notice how sensual your breathing is. Feel sunlight on your skin. The body’s the best home your mind and soul will ever have. Our culture has gotten way disconnected from that truth.

But then, once you start feeling it, the world gets lighter and lighter. 

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For additional information, visit **Matthew Sanford’s** website at [matthewsanford.com](http://matthewsanford.com) and [mindbody-solutions.org](http://mindbody-solutions.org).

**Sara Avant Stover** teaches yoga both locally and internationally. Visit her websites [fourmermaids.com](http://fourmermaids.com) and [expedition-insight.com](http://expedition-insight.com).

## Novel Ideas


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the dharma in America,” she says. “I got to separate the beauty of the practice from the humanity of the practitioners. The fact that people were making mistakes didn’t invalidate the practice. In a way, their mistakes became the doorway into the practice.”

### Union in practice

One day, during a flow-style class, the practices of asana and meditation captivated Cushman on a deeper level. “I realized the breath was a physical experience—it was not something you just watched,” she says. “It was something you *were*, that you let roll through you in a tangible, tactile way. From then on, I couldn’t separate meditation and yoga.”

Cushman eventually moved to San Francisco, got married, had her first book published, and became pregnant. But a couple of days before her due date, her baby stopped moving. “More than anything else, the experience shattered my illusion that yoga was somehow going to protect me—that doing all these ‘right’ things was somehow going to give me a life magically free of loss,” she says.

When she connected with the universal truth that all beings suffer loss—and that she didn’t have to suffer alone—her heart opened wide. “When I did have the wonderful joy a little more than a year later of having a child who lived, I certainly held that experience with more understanding of its preciousness and fragility,” she says. “I couldn’t—I still can’t—take a single moment for granted. And when I really *feel* that, I can experience the joy all the more.” 

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For more info on **Anne Cushman’s** novel, visit [enlightenmentforidiots.com](http://enlightenmentforidiots.com)