

Magic Carpet or Life Raft

A Yoga teacher's journey through dark territory to personal transformation through the practice of Yoga.

When I found out I was pregnant, I was angry. I had just got my life working exactly how I wanted it. A baby meant massive change ahead. Immersed in an exciting career in entertainment, I was 34 and practicing Yoga for all its physical benefits—extreme flexibility, tight abs—and the really hot male instructor I hoped would adjust me in triangle pose. Those seemed like the benefits to Yoga. But with a basketball in my belly this would all change—and I didn't want change.

For several months, I raged at God and made no modifications in my practice. Then one day, feeling the exhaustion of pregnancy, I opened my Yoga mat at home, curled up in a simple *balasana*, and sobbed. When the tears subsided, I sank into a slow *nadi sodhana*. Soon a stillness unlike anything I had felt in the steamy, energetically charged Yoga studio where I normally practiced descended like a warm blanket around my shoulders.

With a marriage already on the rocks, a career in acting and modeling soon to be sidelined, a body that was no longer totally mine, and no idea how I would be as a parent, I just knew—somewhere in the quiet of my being—that everything would be okay. Where had this deep peace come from? Surely it was grace. My Yoga mat suddenly felt like a magic carpet.

Fast forward two years...

I left Los Angeles, with all its glamour and opportunity—said goodbye to friends, family, career, convertible, and hot Yoga teacher. Trying to preserve the marriage, I came to live at a New England boarding school where my husband had taken a job. Nothing and no one was familiar. I was trying to be a good mom to our baby and, now pregnant with another, struggling with depression and a severe sense of isolation. Only my Yoga mat felt safe and familiar, and I went to it each morning, teaching myself new *asanas* from David Swenson's



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Ashtanga Yoga Practice Manual, since there were no classes in the area.

Then at the fifth month, we learned the baby was significantly underdeveloped and probably would not live to be born. Lost between grief and denial, I returned from the ultrasound, rolled out my mat, and collapsed into an ocean of tears. My Yoga mat now just felt like a life raft.

In the remaining months of the pregnancy, I clung to my life raft for sanity and hope, for faith and strength. Month after month, the baby inside of me grew and so did something deeper from the Yogic teachings that I hadn't realized was there—something more lasting than the thrill of holding a perfect *virabhadrasana* or a spectacular *vrksasana*. A sense of peace and clarity had come through years of practice that even during this most trying time imaginable did not falter.

Until...

At nine-and-half months, only ten days before the due date, our baby died in the

womb. I left the hospital with empty arms and a shattered heart. Going home to a baby's room with no baby left me with nothing but stillness. But not the peaceful kind. I stepped off my mat and into a meditation in the cave of human pain. I sat for hours in a rocking chair in her room, holding the tiny little urn of ashes, wondering what practice might make the longing go away. Nothing did for two long months, until one night, in the quiet of sitting and praying, a moment of grace entered on a deep breath. Whether it was her as an angel, or God talking, I don't know. But what I heard changed everything. "It is time to rebuild the spiritual warrior within. Get up and get present with your son. Trust the practice."

I began to move—basic *asana*, an *ujjayii* breath or two, a few moments of meditation. Feeling challenged just to get through each day, I decided to show up and practice something, anything. Thinking was overwhelming and sad. But I could practice—simply, unattached, and aware.

I felt totally disconnected from my body. After all, this was the vehicle that failed to deliver the baby girl I had carried and loved. But with gentle *asana* practice, eventually I stopped hating my physical self, recognizing that I couldn't be peaceful with others if I couldn't begin within. My physical strength returned and with each intentional breath I became more engaged with daily experience. Although I still missed the child we did not have, I was no longer wracked with the debilitating emotional pain of loss and grief.

Yoga had become my Therapy

Depending on the emotional wave of the day, each morning my mat would become either magic carpet or life raft. Move, breathe, focus, turn inward, be still, bliss. Bliss? How could I be feeling bliss after losing a baby? Bliss or misery. The choice was mine, and I knew it.

I poured myself into the study of Patanjali's Eight Limbs. Through the *yamas* and *niyamas*, I felt *(continued on page 25)*

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onPractice, *continued*

Yoga is not about a destination or accomplishment, but rather the unfolding of experience and the ability to realize oneself as more than that experience.

lovingly directed on how to reenter life. *Asana* and *pranayama* kept me connected to my body. Practicing *pratyahara*, *dharana*, and *dhyana* directed my vision toward the oneness where we all share both pain and hope. I started to treasure the simple moments of parenting my son and realized that I wasn't angry anymore. I was simply grateful.

But just a year later, too strained by the loss of our second baby, my marriage ended. And yet again I found myself challenged to reach even deeper into Yoga for a lifeline, something to get me through another massive change.

Then the biggest realization of all hit. There was nothing to "get through." It was extraordinarily clear. Every tear, every peal of laughter—it is all Yoga.

I knew I needed to share this with others who were suffering. I opened a studio and began working with people in a process that echoes my personal experience and one that I call Transformative Yoga Therapy.

Eight years later, I am awed by how this practice has met me every step of the way. No matter what waters of emotional circumstance surround me, I know I am safe inside the practice. No matter how I get to my mat, with laughter or tears, energy or exhaustion, once there, I rest knowing that like a gently rocking raft, my practice holds me as I flow through the river of life.

Some days I chant with abandon or luxuriate in feeling my limbs expand in *adho mukha svanasana*. Other days I pray not to fall off my raft into the swirling currents of emotional reactivity. Standing tall in *tadasana*, I ask Spirit to give me something of value to say to those who come to me for inspiration.

People say their practice evolves over the years, but over time it is *my practice that has evolved me*. In my 20s, driven and determined, the practice awakened my physical being into all of its intricate sensations and earthly pleasures.

In my 30s I learned to understand my emotional energies. Allowing myself to fully feel but also to let go of feelings, I learned that I am more than the ebbing and flowing tides.

Now in my 40s, my practice has evolved me into someone who can be present with whatever is occurring, without having to do anything other than love and be. I share this with my students so they will know that Yoga is not about a destination or accomplishment, but rather the unfolding of experience and the ability to realize oneself as more than that experience.

Over the past 15 years, I have survived some of life's most tumultuous waters—loss of a child, a marriage, a home, a career; severe depression, anxiety, stress, and grief. My practice has found me wherever I am, asked more from me than I thought I could give, and rewarded me tenfold with strength, energy, and renewed hope.

I never could have imagined this journey way back in my "hot" Yoga class in Los Angeles. To say that I feel gratitude for Yoga doesn't even come close to describing the debt I owe to this tradition. *I would not be here now without it.* For this I bow my head and whisper *om*. **YTT**



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truth and love through Yoga as a writer and a retreat and workshop leader internationally. www.stillnessinmotion.info