

Mindful Healing

HOW THE PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS CAN HELP YOU NAVIGATE THROUGH TIMES OF HEALING AND STRESS.

MIND•FUL —
CONSCIOUS OR AWARE OF SOMETHING.

HEAL•ING —
THE PROCESS OF BECOMING SOUND OR HEALTHY AGAIN.



MY STORY

When I was barely three months old, in 1967, I contracted a severe flu, dubbed the “Hong Kong Flu”. My mother, who was new to motherhood at the time, was reading a book about vitamins, which people were just learning about at the time. She read that Vitamin A could help with colds and flus so she started giving me large doses to help with my illness. These days Vitamin A is sold as Beta Carotene, a form which, if taken in large doses, the excess is just flushed out of the system, much like Vitamin C. But back then, Vitamin A was toxic if taken in large doses, something no one knew at the time.

In her eagerness to cure my flu, my mother unintentionally gave me a massive overdose of Vitamin A. It calcified all my joints causing great pain. Instead of just one soft spot on my head like normal babies, my entire head was soft. I started crying all the time and eventually I was taken to the hospital.

I received a complete blood transfusion to remove the Vitamin A from my system. I was diagnosed with the first case of HyperVitaminosis A which caused bone deformities in my legs, concentrated in the growth centers of my knees.

Since my case was brand new, my doctors really didn't know what they were dealing with and told my parents many things:

- I wouldn't live to adulthood
- I would be dwarfed
- I wouldn't be able to have children
- That I'd be arthritic as a young woman

None of which turned out to be true but:

- I spent my childhood in and out of the hospital in traction, casts, wheelchairs and crutches.
- I had over 20 operations on my legs and before I was 17 years old
- Every hospitalization was months at a time, including one full year in the hospital
- Both legs grew slower than normal and my right leg the slowest; at one point my right leg was 5" shorter than left

When I was twelve I transferred to a specialized orthopedic hospital where I received a series of groundbreaking surgeries which lengthened my right leg to nearly match the left. I was even featured on the show “That's Incredible”, along with other kids, because the leg lengthening surgery was so revolutionary.

After my last surgery at age 17, the only time I was in the hospital was for the birth of my children. I did not take any prescription medication and rarely any over the counter medicine as well. I adopted a healthy lifestyle involving regular exercise and home cooked, low fat meals infused with lots of vegetables.

INFLUENCE OF YOGA

I practiced yoga my whole life as a way to maintain flexibility, strengthen the muscles around my knee joint and improve balance. Even though I did a wide variety of low impact exercise, I always returned to yoga.

In June 2017, a yoga instructor recognized my love of yoga and suggested I become a teacher. At first I discounted the idea but the more I thought about it, the more inspired I became. Although I had done yoga all my life, my mother had even taught yoga, I had never considered teaching it, probably because with my legs, some of the standing poses were challenging for me. But with my teacher's encouragement, I realized that yoga was accessible to everyone. That inspiration became a passion that would change my life. In September 2017 I began my training.

HEALTH CRISIS

Two months into my yoga teacher training I discovered a lump in my breast that, after many tests, ultimately resulted in a diagnosis of Stage 2 Invasive Breast Cancer in December 2017. I would not complete my yoga training until March 2018. As difficult as it was, I decided to wait to do any treatment until after my training was completed. I used the time to explore all my options.



AGE 12, RECEIVING THE LEG LENGTHENING TREATMENT (PHOTO BY DAVID X YOUNG)

Having cancer was at first unthinkable — I thought I had done everything possible to be in optimal health — yet sometimes the unthinkable happens to the best of us. While we can't control what may happen in our lives, we can control how we handle it. I used the techniques of mindfulness to guide me to what was the right treatment for me.

I began teaching yoga in January, before my certification was complete, with classes in *Restorative Yoga*, gentle yoga with a focus on reducing stress and restoring the body to health. Through my practice of yoga and mindfulness, I was able to go through a stressful time with clarity. While I did experience fear & stress at times, I was able to use breathing techniques and positive visualization to pass through these feelings instead of letting them take hold.

Four days after my graduation from yoga training, I had a bilateral mastectomy with immediate reconstruction. I had plenty of time to think during this process and realized that I had already begun a journey towards healing before my diagnosis...that journey brings me here today.

Yoga kept me strong and flexible — I was able to stand straight by 2 weeks after surgery, when most patients need 4-5 months. At the end of April, I returned to teaching *Restorative Yoga*. I soon realized that as a cancer survivor, I had the ability to influence and heal others. I decided to explore an additional certification through the Christina Phipps Foundation & the Mayo Clinic which trains certified yoga teachers to work with people impacted by cancer.

There is no way that having cancer is a positive experience. But any negative experience can be transformed into a positive one. It doesn't erase the overall suckiness of the experience but it can lead you to new, positive influences you never thought were possible.

The first step in this transformation is overcoming fear. Fear can be powerful — don't fight it, just let it pass through you then move on. Imagine your negative feelings like ocean waves with you standing knee-deep in the sea. If you resist the waves and try to stay standing, the wave will knock you over. If, however, you dive into the wave, you will pass through it and come back up on the surface.

HOW I HAVE BEEN MINDFUL (LESSONS FROM SHERLOCK HOLMES)

- **The mind is an attic: keep yours well organized**
— Be your own advocate, learn about what you are dealing with, keep records, ask questions and get second opinions
- **A cluttered mind prevents organized thought**
— Only decide what you have to at that moment; allow time to connect with instincts, trust your gut
- **Our attics can change, and this is a benefit worth exploiting**— Stress changes us; embrace the change, look for the positive and move past the negative.

HOW I HAVE BEEN HEALED (LESSONS FROM BEING A WARRIOR)

- In order to experience the positive effects of healing, **you must want to heal**
- **You are the only one** who can make decisions about your life
- Use positive visualization to sustain you — where were you a year ago, how much has changed? Where will you be a year from now? **See yourself healthy & stress-free**
- Being brave is not about being fearless but about **not letting the fear control you**
- In times of stress, **build your tribe** and learn how they can help you — some people are *feelers*: they will give you hugs and ask you how you are doing, while other people are *actors*: who can take you places, bring you food and help with tasks.

HOW TO BE MORE MINDFUL

- Practice Yoga
- Meditate
- Balance your Chakras
- See the Positive in everyday things
- Let go



MAY 2018, AGE 50, A CERTIFIED YOGA INSTRUCTOR AND CANCER SURVIVOR.

RESOURCES

- *Buddha's Brain*, Rick Hanson, PhD
- *The Untethered Soul*, Michael A. Singer
- *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle
- *Stillness Speaks*, Eckhart Tolle
- *A Gift for Healing*, Deborah Cowens

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