

Mind-body connection: Yoga teacher, author pushes rehabilitation professionals and doctors to create continuum of holistic health care

By *TERRY RINDFLEISCH* | *La Crosse Tribune*

"Mind-body integration is more than a personal health strategy. It is a movement of consciousness that can transform the world." — Matthew Sanford

Matthew Sanford lost his father, his sister and the life he knew and imagined in a car accident on an icy Iowa road almost 30 years ago.

He was 13 years old, and the accident left him paralyzed from the chest down. Sanford had to face life as a paraplegic in a wheelchair.

Sanford went on and graduated at the top of his high school class and studied philosophy at the University of Minnesota and University of California-Santa Barbara.

"It was a relatively normal life, but a painful one," Sanford said in a recent interview. "I was a very athletic kid, and I missed my body.

"When I started studying philosophy and the mind-body relationship in graduate school, I looked differently at my horizons," he said. "I tried to fit in, and it wasn't working. I went searching for my body and myself."

In yoga and the study of mind-body connection, Sanford found healing and life.

"Basically, I woke up and I was transcended," he said. "I learned how to live more in my body."

Now at the age of 41, Sanford is a nationally recognized yoga teacher, speaker, author and a pioneer in mind-body integration to help others heal in ways never thought possible.

Gundersen Lutheran is bringing Sanford to La Crosse on Wednesday, Oct. 17. He will give presentations at Bethany-Riverside Nursing Facility and Gundersen Lutheran. Sanford has written a book, "Waking," a memoir about his trauma and transcendence, in its fifth printing.

Sanford said the title of his book was perfect to describe his journey.

"I woke up in a coma after 31/2 days and my life changed forever," Sanford said. "It's also my waking up to the subtle connections between mind and body and the level of presence we all need, disabilities or not. It changed my life forever.

"I couldn't go on much longer the way I was," he said. "I was not feeling good, and I was disconnected from my body. I needed this mind-body connection for survival."

Sanford said he is trying to get medical professionals to look at physical injury, including his own spinal cord injury, in a different way and change the way they treat and rehabilitate patients.

"They saw my injury as a physical one when it was a mind-body injury," Sanford said. "It was harder for my mind to be in my body.

"They were worried I would not accept my limitations, but the impact was to stop listening to my body below the point of injury, and drag my paralyzed body through life," he said.

But through yoga, Sanford said he discovered a different way to be in his body. "I can feel into my own body, and I'm connecting to my heels and hip bone," he said. "The mind can go into the body without muscular action, and it helps with balance and strength."

It's not about overcoming a disability, he said.

"There is no willful overcoming of the body or injury," Sanford said. "But I can occupy my body better and accept my body at a different level."

Yoga restores a sense of wholeness between mind and body — and physically it increases his strength,

balance and flexibility. "When I squeeze my ankle, I feel it come into my spine. It helps me sense and tells when I'm in pain or cold. I was given a limiting definition of sensation."

Sanford said he has more abdominal control because his mind is more connected to his body. "Most people with disabilities are not connected to their bodies," he said. "Yoga is the bridge, but any mind-body connection is grounding in your body."

Sanford's health-care focus began 10 years ago when he started teaching an adaptive yoga class for people living with a wide range of disabilities. He now reaches doctors and rehabilitation professionals nationwide. He has become the driving force on a new groundbreaking project to create a continuum of holistic health care — institutional partners include Courage Center, a leading transitional rehabilitation facility, and Abbott Northwestern Hospital's Sister Kenny Rehabilitation Institute.

"I'm trying to create a new model," he said. "I teach mind-body connections to the patient. I have no sour grapes with the medical profession. They saved my life. But we need to look at rehab in a different way — a way that makes one whole again."

Sanford operates a yoga studio in Minnetonka, Minn, where he and nine other instructors teach weekly classes to people of all abilities. In 2001, he founded Mind Body Solutions, a nonprofit charitable organization dedicated to the simple notion that minds and bodies work better together.

He said he is developing a series of DVDs and expanding his Web site. One of his goals is to help returning veterans from Iraq who suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Sanford said he advises people with disabilities to seek within their mind-body relationship.

"I had to recognize my paralyzed body didn't stop talking to the rest of my body," he said. "It changes its voice, speaking at a different level, and you have to explore that, and it will deepen your experience of living."

If you go

- "Healing, Recovery and Mind-Body Connection," 9 to 10:30 a.m. Wednesday, Oct. 17, Faith and Life Center, Bethany-Riverside, 2575 S. Seventh St.,

La Crosse, for patients, caregivers and families, free.

- "A Mind-Body Approach to Rehabilitation and Long-Term Recovery," noon to 1:30 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 17, Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center's Rasmus Center, free.

TO REGISTER: Call (608) 775-3851 or e-mail laericks@gundluth.org.

BOOK-SIGNING: He will sign his book, "Waking," after his noon presentation.

WEB SITE: For more information, visit www.matthewsanford.com

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