

Paraplegic chronicles his journey to healing mind-body connection

BY KAY HARVEY July 2nd 2006
Pioneer Press

Matthew Sanford often is still surprised to wake from sleep to glimpse the wheelchair at his bedside that has been with him for more than two-thirds of his life.

Moving cautiously so as not to disturb his sleeping wife, he lifts his paralyzed lower body to the source of mobility that has been his companion for nearly three decades. His yoga students will arrive soon. It is the start of a fresh, new day.

But morning hasn't always promised Sanford so much.

At the tender age of 13, Sanford's spinal cord was ravaged in a car wreck that paralyzed him from the chest down and killed his father and sister. The accident robbed him of something subtler, too, he says: a sense of living in his whole body.

"I became a floating upper torso," he explains.

In his new book, "Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence," the Twin Cities resident chronicles his heart-wrenching struggle and his realization years later of a mind-body connection that allows him to feel whole again. He explores the mysterious gap we all experience between mind and body.

In sessions he leads with doctors, patients and business people, Sanford works to elevate the mind-body relationship to a bona-fide category of health. He hopes his story will wake others to its healing power.

A NEW WORLD OF MOVEMENT

At age 40, Sanford fondly remembers the athletic body he had as a kid. After the accident, he saw how his mind intervened, lifting him out of his body to help make bearable the pain of surgeries, infections and screws and rods that held his broken frame together. In several "out-of-body experiences," as he calls them, he says he watched what was happening like it was on TV. When the healing began, he tuned it all out. The boy in the body learned to consciously ignore the parts of his being that were silenced by paralysis.

"I was given no tools to connect to my lower body," he writes in his book. "I was told it was just a loss." And for 12 years, he believed it.

After the 1978 accident, Sanford returned to classes at his junior high in Duluth, where he'd been the only seventh-grader to make the softball and basketball teams. That part of his life was history. But he was smart, popular and became a student leader. He went on to graduate from Duluth East High School and the University of Minnesota-Duluth with a degree in philosophy.

While a graduate student in philosophy at the University of California at Santa Barbara, he studied mind-body consciousness. He was turned off by "the heady mind approach," he remembers. A war in the Persian Gulf and events in his personal life stirred a pot of disillusionment. He realized he was stricken with unrealized grief. "I hadn't acknowledged all that had happened to me," he says.

At age 25, he took up yoga. "I had reached a saturation point with living in opposition to my paralyzed body," he remembers.

Yoga opened a new world of movement to him. His teacher, Jo Zukovich, coached him to spread his legs wide into a V. He felt a sense of energy awoken in his paralyzed body, and he remembers a "huge and wonderful" feeling he calls "the recovery of life force."

He dropped out of graduate school, and yoga became his teacher. "With yoga, I began to reclaim the paralyzed part of my body." He learned to attain surprising poses — one of which projects his legs straight up in the air — with balance and flexibility rather than abdominal muscles, as an unparalyzed yoga practitioner would do.

His transformation stretched beyond yoga poses. His awareness of the mind-body connection came from other sources, too, like listening to the "silence" of his paralysis and the "healing stories" that grew from his life experiences.

The paradox of mind-body connection, he says, is that it can be so ordinary and yet so potentially healing. "I don't have to walk again," he says. Just knowing he can connect mind and body makes him feel more whole.

His understanding of mind-body connection brought him a new view of being a whole person. "Wholeness is not just in your self worth or your accomplishments," he says. "It's a level of nourishing presence that needs to just be."

For able-bodied people, Sanford gives these examples of the mind-body connection: When a weary person sinks into bed and feels relief, or when a hand placed on an arm grounds the person in a stressful experience.

When people understand that connection, they can learn to calm themselves — with meditation or a deep, calming breath.

TWO LIVES

Sanford feels now that he's "in his whole body." As he talks with a reporter, he pulls one leg up with his hands and sets a foot on the seat of his wheelchair. He squeezes his ankle and feels a surge up his spine.

As he rolls his wheelchair across the floor, he says he feels a buzz in his feet. When his feet touch the floor, he feels "an awareness" in his heels.

He has studied Iyengar yoga, which emphasizes alignment and precision. As he progressed, he became a teacher of yoga, too. He has created two businesses, the nonprofit Mind Body Solutions and MBS Yoga studio (www.mindbody-solutions-mn.org). His classes include both able and disabled students.

"I teach people who stand, though I cannot," he explains.

And he has created a rich personal life. He and his wife of 10 years, Jennifer, live in Orono with their 6-year-old son, Paul, and a covey of cats.

His book is the new chapter, he says, in a saga of recovery and discovery.

" 'Waking' is for me like coming home," he says. "It's like I've been off from the group, and now I've returned to the group."

But he admits that writing the book tested his courage. It forced him to relive the intense emotional pain of a personal and family tragedy. He feels like he's had two lives: One that ended when he was 13 and another that began. "My life's been hard. I gained some insights through extreme trauma. But I'm in love with living," he says.

He sees his life now as a river gaining current rather than changing current. His life taught him that bad things are going to happen, but it's what we take from them that matters.

"If you stay patient with your life and listen to it, wonderful things happen a little bit at a time."

Kay Harvey can be reached at kharvey@pioenerpress.com or 651-228-5468.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JENNIFER SANFORD

Matthew Sanford works with his yoga teacher, Jo Zukovich of San Diego, at Mind Body Solutions Yoga, where Sanford teaches yogo to able and disabled students.